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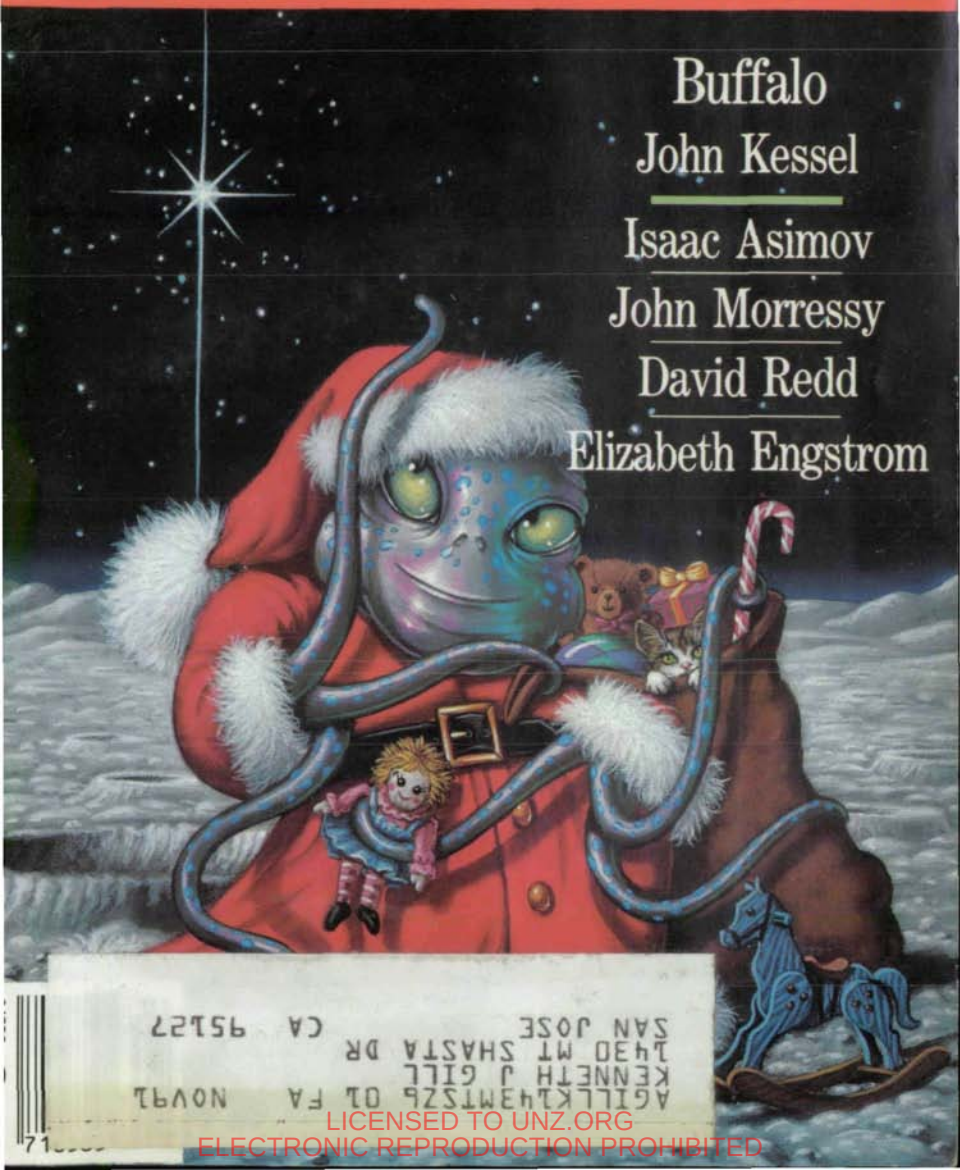

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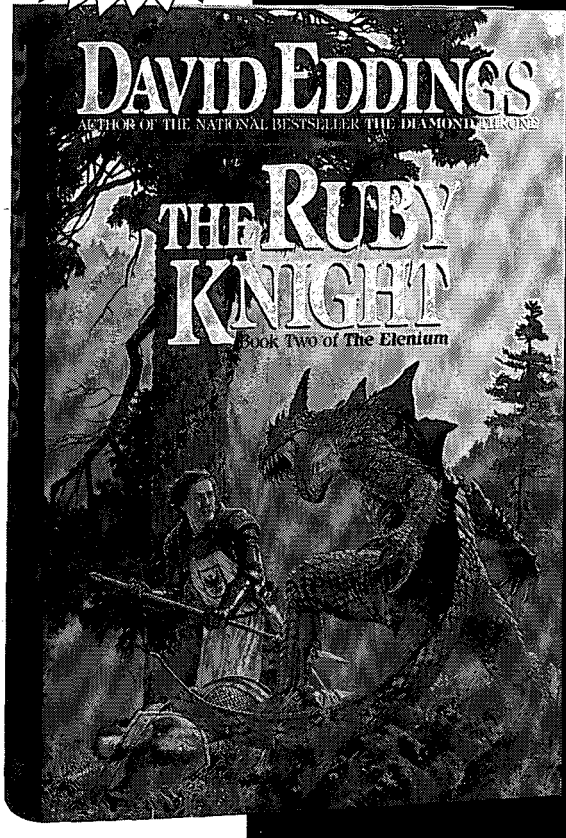

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THE MAGAZINE OF

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There is a lot going on in this superior story — the poisoning of Earth, an alien visitation, a compelling personal drama — and it's remarkable that this is only the third Sf sale by the author, who writes: "I'm in my early forties, grew up in the Bronx, work part-time as a reference librarian, and have degrees in philosophy from Cornell and U. of Rochester." Mr. Cornell has also published some mainstream work and edited an anthology of writing about dreams called DREAMS ARE WISER THAN MEN.

PUSH

By Richard Cornell

K'RYLLN HUNCHED OVER the meditation console, cradling the flickering Nuance-globe in his long, scaly fingers. The image-flower pulsed as a steady stream of alien data-packets flowed through the nuance matrix. Burning clouds of acid mist seeped through the delicate petals, filling the soft core.

Another race poised on the brink of self-destruction.

K'rylln leaned forward, pressing the console jack into the socket at the base of his brow. Alien images swirled around him like falling leaves as his consciousness entered the matrix. "O rose, thou are sick!" he cried, soaking up thought-balls from the ship's Memory Gardens until his petals began to shimmer and overload.

An other-race poisoned on the brink of self-construction.

Tiny silver triangles danced round the K'rylln-blossom like fire-gnats. *Rillic,* he thought, pleases with himself.

Suddenly everything went black.

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* * *

"Heard about the new satellite?" Claudia asked.

"Oh God, not another one," said Arthur Pendleton as he stepped off the elevator into the fourth-floor offices of Domestic Life.

"Over the South Pole."

Pendleton rested his brown attaché case on the reception desk, unsnapped the latch, and drew out a folded copy of that morning's *San Francisco Chronicle*. He'd woken with a headache, and now his head was pounding. "Soviets Denounce China," the headline shrieked. A front-page drawing showed only one satellite poised over the North Pole.

"I heard it on the radio. They think this one's Chinese, too."

A weapons satellite in geosynchronous orbit above the Pole could strike any target in North America — or the Soviet Union — within minutes. Now there was another at the opposite end of the Earth. He tucked the paper under his arm, trying not to think about it. "Any calls for me?"

"Just one — Mr. Farnsworth."

Arthur groaned.

"Don't worry," Claudia said. "I told him you were with a client on another line."

"If anyone else calls, I'm not here yet. I've got to have some coffee before I can deal with Farnsworth."

He walked down the aisle to his office, nodding to the others as he passed their cubicles. As floor chief, his job was to review their work. That meant any contested claim not readily resolved ended up on his desk.

The usual pile of mail was waiting for him. He skimmed through it quickly, tossing most of it into neatly labeled boxes above his desk. The latest edition of *Insurance Facts* went into the "Read" bin, along with a stack of "Notification of Payment" carbons. Five thick bundles bound with rubber bands went into "Cases Pending." That left one turgid, twelve-page document titled "Re: Interpretation of Contestability Clauses 9e, f, and g," which he'd had a week and kept pushing to the bottom of the pile. Arthur couldn't muster the concentration required to read it in his present condition; it, too, went into "Read."

He picked up his Cheshire Cat mug and went out to the coffee urn to fill it. He'd just returned to his desk and washed down two aspirins with a mouthful of the scalding brew, when the red light on his phone began

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blinking; a moment later the intercom buzzed. He punched the white button and picked up the receiver while the red light continued flashing. "I'm not in, remember?" he said.

"It's Farnsworth, Mr. Pendleton. I thought you'd—"

"Uh, thanks, Claudia." He hit the red button. "Good morning, Mr. Farnsworth."

"I'd like to talk to you, Pendleton. You free this morning?"

"Well. . . ."

"Good. Come up to my office around eleven."

Ninety minutes later Pendleton sat in a leather chair facing Farnsworth's large oak desk. The aspirins seemed to have had no effect.

Farnsworth stood at the window, gazing at the fog-shrouded San Francisco skyline. He was a large, trim man, impeccably dressed in a tailored gray suit and pin-striped vest. The plush office, with its thick carpet and dark wood paneling, felt like a judge's chambers.

"I've been looking over some of your reports, Arthur." Farnsworth turned back to his desk and picked up a sheaf of papers. "Apparently you didn't read my last memo."

"Memo?"

Farnsworth put the pile of papers back on the desk and looked directly at Arthur. "The one about claims on our cancer policies."

Pendleton remained silent. Outside, the tip of the Transamerica Pyramid poked through the morning fog. "I'm familiar with the company's position."

"Yet you approved this!" Farnsworth took the first batch of papers from the top of the pile. "This woman lives in Antioch and filed a claim for uterine cancer. Do you recall the details?"

Arthur nodded. He'd just sent the papers up yesterday. Thirty-seven, divorced, three kids. Now cancer.

"Do you know how long she's lived in Antioch?"

Arthur shook his head. The cancer was in remission when she bought the policy; she hadn't tried to conceal that—

"Thirty-two years, Pendleton. Her parents moved to Antioch during the fifties, when she was five years old. Does Antioch ring any bells with you?"

"I lived there for a few years when I first got married," he said quietly.

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"What?"

Arthur cleared his throat and said, "It's near where I live, in Pleasant Hill."

Farnsworth stared at him. "You haven't been doing your homework, Arthur. The Antioch Dump Site has been piling up everything from radioactive berryllium to PCBs since the forties, practically in your client's backyard."

Arthur recalled the big controversy in the mid-seventies, when residents of the nearby housing tract tried to have the dump closed after clouds of toxic fumes from the open liquid-waste pits caused the entire city to be evacuated. He and Sara had already moved to Pleasant Hill.

"If you'd read my memo, Arthur, you'd know that the company will no longer honor claims in which a cancer is contracted after knowing or willful exposure to such hazards. The danger of the Antioch Dump Site was a matter of public record; therefore, your client's decision to live right next to it must be construed as knowing *and* willful."

"But we sold her a policy. We'll be sued for violation of contract."

"Come on, Arthur. Wouldn't we contest any claim stemming from, say, a skydiving accident?"

"You can't equate living next to a dump with jumping out of an airplane."

"The odds of surviving the jump are much higher."

Pendleton couldn't believe what he was hearing. "You can't get away with something like this."

"*We*, Pendleton — and we're not trying to 'get away with' anything."

"We can't prove her cancer was caused by living near the dump."

Farnsworth looked disappointed. "Do you suppose it's just coincidence that the cancer rate near the oil refineries in Martinez or any of the dozen toxic-waste sites in Contra Costa is triple that of the rest of the country? Love Canal was no accident, Pendleton. It's just a matter of time before the evidence is considered conclusive." He waved at the sheaf of papers on his desk. "By the time any of these cases reach the courts, our position will be incontrovertible."

Arthur kept thinking of the woman in Antioch, and all the other claims he'd reviewed in the past few months. "We sold those policies in good faith. We can't weasel out now."

"You're looking at it the wrong way, Pendleton. We're not responsible

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for the rising cancer rate. The more claims we reject, the more suits will be brought against the real culprits: the government and the military and the corporations. Let *them* pay for the harm they've done."

"But *we* sold the policies."

"We're a business, Pendleton, not a charity — something you might keep in mind." He waited a moment, then stood and handed the pile of papers to Arthur. "I'll expect you to rework these reports."

THE DOWNTOWN BART station was crowded. Arthur shuffled into line with the other tired-looking commuters as flashing overhead panels announced a train's approach. When he smiled at the woman standing next to him, she eyed him suspiciously, as if he were trying to sneak in front of her. Definite Red Queen potential, he thought, noting the color of her dress.

The BART train whirred smoothly into the station, its silvery shell dull with grime. So much for the air we breathe, he thought, his head still throbbing despite the aspirin he'd taken all day. Could Farnsworth's working in San Francisco be construed as "willful" exposure to smog?

The train doors opened, and he was swept into the nearest car by the surging crowd. He clutched at a pole to catch his balance, then slid into the last vacant seat.

The train started, stopped, then slowly pulled forward again. Arthur felt dizzy. The other commuters seemed to tower over him, as if he'd somehow shrunk.

Of course! That business about the cushions. Seven people had died from toxic fumes in the tube fire last week. All the cushions had been removed until they could be replaced with safer material. He was actually sitting a few inches lower than usual.

The pressure in his head was increasing. He closed his eyes, This must be how Alice felt after she'd taken the potion in that little bottle marked "Drink me!" Arthur slumped against the seat as the train entered the tunnel beneath the bay and rushed toward Oakland.

"It was all very well to say, 'Drink me,' but the wise little Alice was not going to do that *in a hurry!" First she would see whether it was marked* POISON, *for she'd read stories about the unpleasant things that happened to children who would not remember the simple rules their friends had taught them, such as . . . "If you drink much from a bottle marked 'poison,'*

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it is almost certain to disagree with you, sooner or later."

"Pendleton! Is that you?"

Arthur woke with a start and looked up. The train had already passed beneath the bay and was stopped at the downtown Oakland station. A small, dark, mustached man was pushing through the crowd toward him.

"Joe?"

"Long time no see!" Cantrell smiled warmly. Arthur stood to shake hands with him.

"What are you doing in Oakland? I thought you were over in the city with Pacific Trust."

"I left Pacific. I'm at Nichols Ford now. Down on Fourteenth Street."

"They sell insurance?"

"Cars. You still at Domestic?"

Arthur nodded. There was an awkward silence. Finally he said, "What happened at Pacific?"

"You didn't hear?" Joe looked around nervously. "Big directive from the top. Reinterpretation of the contestability clauses."

Arthur felt a cold knot in his gut.

"I got this case, a guy from Lawrence Livermore Lab. Malignant melanoma, pretty bad. So he files on major medical."

"He wasn't covered?"

"He *was* covered — until the new directive. Now his claim's invalid. 'Willful exposure to radiation.'"

"But that's not fair!"

"That's what I said. Made a big stink. But the company was adamant."

"Did they can you?"

"Hell no! I quit." He leaned closer. "I started in sales, you know. What if I'd sold that policy? What could I tell the guy's family? 'Sorry, I lied?'"

"But you sold those policies in good faith. You're not responsible for what the company does."

"Maybe. But I said to myself, 'Joe, if you stay with them, you're agreeing to it.'"

They fell silent as the train passed under the Berkeley ridge, heading east toward the inland valley.

"The melanoma rate is sky-high at Lawrence," Joe said. "It's all the radioactive material they handle, no matter how much they deny it. Pacific is betting that'll hold up in court."

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"He's suing?"

"He's dead. His family is suing."

The train had emerged from underground and was beginning to slow down. Cantrell turned toward the window and gazed down from the elevated BART tracks. "They say there's enough plutonium at that lab to make this whole valley uninhabitable for a thousand years. It'll all go when the big quake hits."

"They also say insurance men are a gloomy lot, but I never believed it till now."

"Yeah," said Cantrell thoughtfully. Then he realized the reference was to him. "And former insurance men, too!"

They were approaching Orinda, where Cantrell lived.

"So how are things at Domestic?"

"All right," Arthur lied.

The train came to a stop. "Hey, listen, it was good to see you again, Arthur. Maybe we can take in a game at Candlestick sometime — I'll give you a call when the Giants start winning." He gave Arthur a little punch on the arm, and left.

When Pendleton got home, he took a package of steaks out of the refrigerator, then went out to the back patio and started some charcoal burning in the barbecue pit. Sara was dropping the kids off for the weekend. Maybe she would stay for dinner.

His mind jumped from one uncomfortable thought to another. Sara. Cantrell. Farnsworth.

He flicked on the television set in time to catch the end of the news. Clinton Bradshaw, the blustery air force general who'd started the ballyhoo over the "Chinese threat in space," was declaring that the two satellites were "undoubtedly military installations." He urged Congress to approve the new defense budget "without further delay." At least the old windbag speaks his mind, Arthur thought.

Sara still hadn't arrived when the news ended. Arthur turned off the TV and retreated upstairs to his study. He sat at his desk, sifted through some bills he'd been meaning to pay, and ended up staring at the black-and-white photograph on the wall before him. It was a picture of Charles Lutwidge Dodgson on his famous outing with Alice Liddell — but Sara had pasted Arthur's face over Dodgson's, reprinted the photo, and

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presented it to him as a birthday present.

Arthur lifted the wooden frame off its hook. On the back she'd written, "To Sebastian Close, from Sara Pendleton." He smiled. Following the same procedure Dodgson had used to create his famous pseudonym, she'd started with his full name. Arthur Austin Pendleton, then translated his first and middle names to Latin, reversed their order, and translated back into English — cleverly introducing the Greek equivalent of "Augustus" and substituting the word *artus* for 'Artur." Arthur Austin = Arturus Augustus = Sebastus Artus = Sebastian Close.

How far we've fallen, he thought sadly, remembering when they were fresh out of college and just married. He'd planned to teach English, but couldn't find a job. Sara was pregnant with Sophie, they needed money, so he'd taken the job at Domestic. He could have made more elsewhere, but he wanted to help people. Insurance was a good alternative to the nightmare of social work, he thought, promising clients the most direct assistance possible: money to pay their bills.

He thought of the woman suffering from cancer in Antioch, and how Domestic was trying to weasel out of her claim. "We're a business, Pendleton," Farnsworth had told him. Yes, but their business was helping people.

He looked at the clock: 7:20. Where the hell was Sara?

K'rylln pulled his consciousness back from the matrix. The Nuance-globe appeared solid with blackness. Then a face appeared at its center.

"We've found a jumphole, sir," Nemr'll announced.

"How close will it take us?"

"Right down the *drain*," he said, grinning at his own triple pun — "d'rayn" being a pointed remark, and "dryn!" the sound of a dart hitting the center of its target. *Drain* was an alien word.

K'rylln smiled. Nemr'll, the Ship's Chameleon, had been studying the alien culture, too.

"Release the beacon. And Nemr'll —"

K'rylln wasn't sure what he wanted to say. This was always the most difficult part of any mission. They were servants of Rill, carrying His Laughter across the galaxies — yet each new race was different; each called for its own unique gesture or sign. He must continue to study the alien culture, and trust the Universal Laughter to show him the way. Nemr'll

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a fourth-level Punster, might spark the insight he needed.

"Stay plugged in with me, Nemr'll. I need your help."

Arthur had read Carroll as a child, then rediscovered him in college, when a philosopher professor called *Through the Looking-Glass* "the first great contribution to twentieth-century logic." He'd soon devoured both Alice books, then everything else Carroll had written. His graduate work was in Victorian literature, his master's thesis titled "The Logic of Whimsy: The Use of Category Errors in Carroll's 'Alice' Stories." On their first date, he took Sara to a musical production of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland.*

By then he'd begun collecting what Carrolliana his modest budget would allow — works by various illustrators, a Dodgson photograph album, several biographies, a toy figure collection. He dreamed of discovering the lost galleys for "The Wasp in a Wig," the famous "suppressed" pages of *Through the Looking-Glass* that later surfaced in 1974 amidst the holdings of Sotheby Parke Bernet. While he and Sara were dating, he began work on what he hoped would become the definitive study of Carroll.

Marriage, his job, and parenthood put an end to that. Sara wanted to stay home with the kids through their first two years; even with his working full-time at Domestic, they barely made ends meet. He tried to keep up his studies, hoping things would be easier when Sara went back to work.

But Sara didn't go back to work; she went back to school, in business administration. They still had difficulty making ends meet. He still couldn't find a teaching job. "Stop kidding yourself, Arthur," she said. "We're grown-ups now; it's time to start building a career." After three years he stopped sending résumés to the junior colleges. After four, he accepted the promotion to floor chief that he'd turned down the year before.

He spent more and more time fantasizing about Alice and her adventures: idle daydreams at first, then full-fledged flights of escape into the world Carroll had created — at least, that's what Sara thought. He would imagine himself trading quips with the Cheshire Cat, punning wildly at the Mad Hatter's party, or mulling over aphorisms with the dour White Rabbit who'd first led them down the rabbit-hole. Sara thought he'd gone mad. Arthur said it helped him relax. Then he said it helped keep him sane.

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It was past 8:30 when her car turned into the driveway. Arthur jumped up, switched on the porch light, and waited for her at the door, relief slowly turning to anger. The steaks were overcooked and cold; his stomach was a hollow pit; his head was pounding. Damn it! She was supposed to bring the kids for dinner; that was their agreement.

Sophie, his twelve-year-old, was the first in. "Hi, Daddy!" she said as he hugged her. He looked at the worn paperback she was carrying: *Are You There, God! It's Me, Margaret.* "What's this?" "Oh, it's about a girl getting her first period."

"Yuck!" said Chuck, his ten-year-old, as Sophie flopped out on the couch and began reading. "How'd the soccer game go, Chuckie?" "I smashed my knee. Can I have some milk?" He marched off to the kitchen without waiting for a reply.

Finally Sara approached. "Boy, am I glad to be here," she sighed.

"Where the hell were you?" he said coldly as they embraced. "I was worried sick." He immediately regretted snapping at her; her day had probably been just as bad as his.

She leaned away from him, looking surprised. "Didn't you hear? There was a big delay at the tunnel."

"What this time — another pileup?"

"No," she said, leaning with one hand on the back of the couch while she slipped off her shoes. "Some kind of spill. God, I wish heels hadn't come back." She wiggled her stockinged toes. "White powder, a whole truckload. Didn't you hear? They had to close the tunnel." She stretched her arms overhead, then slid out of her dark tweed jacket and tossed it onto the couch. "Insecticide or something."

"I tried the news, but it all 'mystery in space.'"

"That was all I heard today, too. Fosdick thinks they're missile satellites." Her lip curled involuntarily at her boss's name. "He's ready to start flinging H-bombs at them. You know, 'let's destroy the world before the enemy does.'"

"You mean the aliens?" asked Chuck excitedly, returning with his glass of milk.

Arthur looked at Sara, who shrugged.

"Their spaceship is at the North Pole. Me and Joey heard about it over at his house after soccer."

"Joey and I," Arthur corrected.

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"His dad says they're flying saucers, and now everyone's gonna know how *extratrestrials* have been watching the Earth."

"Extra-*ter*-restrials," said Sophie haughtily, looking up from her book.

"He says they sent out a scout ship to look for a place to land. Me and Joey think they're gonna land on the White House and try and kidnap the president."

"Joey and *I*."

"That's ridiculous," said Sophie.

"Yeah, well, you didn't see *Invaders from Another Universe*."

"Miss Pickering says those movies are very misleading, because any civilization capable of traveling to the stars would have evolved beyond the need for violence."

"Yeah, well she's just a dumb teacher!"

"That's enough, Chuckie," Arthur said.

"I bet she didn't see *Masters from Space*. The Krylons were so highly evolved they thought we were just dumb animals, and made us pull their wagons."

"If they were so highly evolved, how come they couldn't invent engines?"

"ENOUGH!"

Chuck, still glowing at the thought of a Krylon invasion, turned toward the TV.

Arthur looked at Sara, who was shaking her head at the kids' antics. "Stay for supper? I've got some steaks that are shoe leather by now. They'll go well with the cold mashed potatoes."

Sara smiled. "You always could cook."

After dinner they played Scrabble. "Why is a raven like a writing desk?" Arthur asked, after Chuckie spelled the word "D-E-S-K." Sophie groaned. "You've told us that one a million times, Dad."

Sara thought for a moment. "Because Poe wrote on both of them."

"I don't get it," Chuckie said.

"It's the Mad Hatter's riddle," Sophie explained. "The answer is supposed to be they both produce notes that are very flat."

"I still don't get it," Chuck said.

While they were arguing, Sara went out with a triple word score and stuck Arthur with twenty-three points.

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"Anyone who beats me at Scrabble get to stay for the night," he told her after the kids had gone to bed. He meant to sound roguish, but ended up closer to vulnerable.

"I don't think I could deal with the tunnel again tonight anyway," she said softly, giving him time to recover. "Lend me some pajamas?"

"Sure."

She leaned over and kissed him gently on the lips. "I'm going to take a quick shower," she said. "Meet you in bed."

Arthur went upstairs to the bedroom, put on his pajamas, and climbed into the king-sized bed. He flicked on the TV by remote control. The eleven o'clock news was just starting. The satellites were now described as "silvery globes twenty meters in diameter," which the Pentagon admitted "did not conform to any known space vehicle." Beijing had issued an official denial accusing the Soviets of disturbing the balance of power.

The local news came on as Sara emerged from the bath in a cloud of steam, wearing his terry cloth robe.

"A highly toxic chemical spill in the East Bay closed the Caldecott Tunnel today, delaying thousands of homeward-bound commuters. The spill occurred when two big rigs collided near the mouth of the tunnel, causing one of the trucks, which was carrying thousands of pounds of ethylene dibromide, to overturn. The deadly substance, a fumigant, was en route to farmers in the San Joaquin Valley, and was described by authorities as 'an extremely potent carcinogen, also known to cause sterility and birth defects.' Motorists who may have come into contact with the white powder are urged to contact health authorities immediately. There is no word yet on possible harmful effects to residents of the nearby Hillview apartments, where clouds of the deadly powder were carried by today's unusually high winds . . . which brings us to Laura Jensen and the weather. . . ."

"Kind of creepy," Sara said as she slipped under the covers. She was wearing one of his pajama tops. No bottom. She shivered at the touch of the cold sheets. "You were supposed to warm up the bed!"

"I was waiting for you," he replied, resting his hand daringly on her abdomen. When she cuddled closer, he ran his hand over the smooth curve of her belly, then up under the pajama top to her breast.

"This late bulletin just in." They looked up at the screen. "Several residents of those Hillview apartments have been taken to nearby Herrick

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Hospital in Berkeley as a 'precautionary measure,' following complaints of headaches and vomiting. Further details as they break."

"I drove right through that stuff," Sara said. "I mean, there was white powder everywhere. They were hosing down the roadway. Chuckie was practically hanging out the rear window." Arthur found the remote-control unit and turned the set off. "Do you think I should call someone?"

"You all seem O.K."

They turned out the lights and slid back under the covers. When he reached for her again, she stiffened. "Please. Just hold me," she whispered.

He was riding on BART with Joe Cantrell — only, it wasn't Joe; it was a white rabbit wearing a waistcoat! They were entering the tunnel, when suddenly the train hit something and lurched to a halt. Sophie and Chuck wouldn't stop arguing. There was white powder everywhere. He had to get the kids out of there! The Rabbit looked at his watch and shook his head sadly.

He woke abruptly and sat up in bed.

"Arthur?" Sara murmured sleepily.

"It's all right. Go back to sleep." He found himself thinking of Farnsworth.

She rolled over. "What's the matter? Was it a dream?" When he remained silent, she sat up beside him. "You said something about a rabbit. . . . Arthur?"

"Sara, it's O.K It's just . . . some trouble at work."

She switched on the night-lamp. "What trouble?"

"Farnsworth called me in today. He wants me to change some reports I submitted."

"Did you screw up?"

"Not really." He turned away from her gaze. "I mean, I hadn't read the memo he sent down, but . . . I don't know." He told her about the new policy.

"I thought Domestic had more class."

"So did I."

"Well, someone'll sue them. Serves 'em right."

Arthur stared down at the rug. "It could take years to settle. People will suffer." His voice wavered. "They deserve better than that."

"Hey," she said softly, kissing his eyelids. "You're really upset."

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He told her what had happened to Cantrell. "Would you leave Domestic?" she asked. Arthur couldn't answer. He knew what she was thinking: the children, his responsibilities, the child-support payments.

Sara didn't press him. Arthur leaned out of bed, turned out the light, and slid back under the covers.

K'rylln stood facing Nemr'll in the black phantom space of the nuance matrix. Between them a pale blue planet hovered in the darkness, two star-points blinking at opposite ends of its axis. The second beacon was in place. Now he would have to act.

What is "Man!" he wondered, his mind swirling with the Might-Have-Beens, the Just-So's, and the Yet-May-Be's of the proud alien race.

Reckless and arrogant! Nemr'll replied.

K'rylln thought of the myriad cultures on the surface of the planet. *Yet He has poetry, and laughs. . . .*

His flesh is killing, but His Spirit still seeks!

Just-so, K'rylln answered. *Just-so.*

Saturday morning they woke to the sound of *Reptiloid Invaders* blasting on the TV downstairs. They stayed in bed and ended up making love. Arthur was groggy, and felt as if someone were slowly inflating a balloon inside his skull, but Sara was insistent — whether from a desire to make up for the night before or her own urgent need, he wasn't sure. Afterward they cuddled dreamily.

"I'm free tonight," he said.

"Arthur, I can't."

"Can't or won't?"

"Can't."

He decided he didn't want to know the details.

She brushed his hair back from his face. "I can stay for the day, if you want."

He shrugged. "Maybe we can take the kids on a picnic."

"How about Seal Bluff Landing?" she suggested shyly. The Bluff jutted into Suisun Bay north of Concord, near the old house in Antioch. They used to go there when they were first married.

"Sounds romantic," he said. She kissed him, and they fell back asleep until Sophie barged in around 10:30.

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"Are you guys going to get back together again?"

Arthur rolled over to look at the clock. "How come you're not watching Shirley Temple?" The Saturday Morning Pendleton Peace Treaty gave Sophie television rights after ten o'clock.

"It's just satellite stuff. Besides, I'm hungry."

"We get the hint. We'll be down in a few minutes. Ask Chuckie to bring in the paper."

"Chuckie doesn't feel good."

He looked at Sara, who was already climbing out of bed.

Chuck said his stomach hurt.

Arthur walked out to the driveway to get the Saturday newspaper. "Crisis in Space," the headline declared. The "weapon platforms" above the Poles had each released smaller satellites, which were moving toward the equator. "Chemical Spill Closes Tunnel." He found the emergency number the Health Department had set up, and called it.

"Well?" asked Sara, outside Chuckie's room.

"They said there's nothing they can do. How's he feel?"

"He has a stomachache."

"That's all? Is he dizzy? Did he throw up?" She shook her head. "They said to bring him down to the hospital if he gets worse, otherwise not to worry."

"Not to *worry*!"

He held her close. "Maybe it's just the junk he ate over at Joey's house."

HE LEFT Sara with Chuckie and went downstairs to tell Sophie they were staying home. She was sitting quietly on the couch and "sort of had a headache." He told her to rest, that he'd bring her a damp towel. *What's happening to us!* he thought.

When he went into the garage to get a fresh towel from the laundry room, he couldn't help glancing at the white rowboat resting beside the piles of old newspapers destined for the recycling center. Stenciled on its bow in bold blue letters was the name *Alice Liddell.* Arthur had built it himself, a perfect replica of the boat Dodgson used on his outing with the Liddell sisters. He'd intended to take Sara and the kids on a similar outing, with himself cast in the role of Dodgson, but Sara had teased him till he abandoned the idea. Soon after, she'd given him the retouched photo,

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perhaps as a way of apologizing. Ever since, the boat had sat in his garage, unused.

He forgot about the towel, and not thinking about what he was doing, climbed into the boat.

He was rowing through a shell-white haze. Sophie and Chuck sat in the bow. The only sound was the splosh and dribble of the oars as they dipped into the pale green water.

A dead fish floated by, then a cup and saucer. They bumped into an empty oilcan, which left a gurgly trail of bubbles as it sank through the slime.

"I think this water's poison," Sophie said.

"Joey's dad says if seven maids with seven mops swept for half a year, still they couldn't get it clear."

"Arthur?"

He shook his head. Sara was standing beside him.

"What are you doing?"

"I was just . . . daydreaming."

Sra was staring at him. He was painfully aware that he was sitting in the boat and couldn't remember how he'd gotten there.

"I'm all right."

"You look pale."

"Look, I'm sorry, O.K.? I've had this incredible headache since yesterday. A pressure . . . sort of a high-pitched whining sound, like when you're stopped under one of those traffic lights—" She was staring at him again. "Sorry. You still don't believe I can hear those things."

"Arthur, is it starting again?"

"I said I was all right. It's just this thing at work; it's got me a little crazy." He immediately regretted saying it.

"Listen, I can take the kids back with me tonight."

"I thought you had plans."

"I don't want to leave the kids alone until I'm sure they're O.K. I really think it would be best."

After Sara had left with the kids, he threw himself down on the bed and slept for several hours. He woke feeling exhausted, and stumbled downstairs to make a fresh pot of coffee. He called Sara; both children had taken naps and seemed a little better. She didn't feel like talking.

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It was starting to get dark outside. He realized he hadn't eaten all day, so he threw a TV dinner in the oven, then went upstairs to shower and shave while it was heating. The hot water helped clear his head. After he'd eaten, he sat down with the thick manila folder Claudia had pulled from Domestic's files for him. It contained ten years' worth of clippings from the *Daily Ledger* about the Antioch Dump.

The sixty-acre site, in use since the forties, had been designated a Class I (Toxic Waste) Site in 1960, but no records were kept of what was dumped there until nearby residents began complaining of noxious odors and corrosive vapors during the early seventies. Fragmentary records mentioned everything from industrial oils to X-ray developer, sulfuric acid, and radioactive beryllium. A court order finally prohibited chemical dumping in 1974, but the open waste ponds that remained continued to claim the lives of dogs and other pets — prompting the fire chief to declare that "young children could fall into the pits and just plain disappear."

After the evacuation of the city from clouds of deadly fumes, the ponds were filled with "absorbent garbage" and covered with two feet of dirt. Local residents were still unhappy; reports of industrial oils oozing up through the soil at Love Canal had just made national news. Finally the entire site was capped with a mantle of "impervious clay" and reclassified to Class II (Municipal Dump). Additional clay dams were installed to prevent seepage into the Contra Costa Canal, only six hundred feet downhill from the dump, and a major conduit of drinking water for the county.

He closed the folder, and thought again of Farnsworth. He would have to decide what to do about the reports by Monday; Farnsworth was sure to check on him. He considered resigning. Then he picked up the phone and called Joe Cantrell.

Joe's wife answered. Joe wasn't home; he was down at the ball field by the junior high.

"In the dark?"

"He said something about having to be in the outfield. Arthur? He's been acting . . . a little strange."

"Man" is a tightrope across the abyss! Nemr'll cried. He held out his hand, palm up, his long fingers pointing at K'rylln.

The admiral reciprocated. A taut rope shot across the cybernetic void, joining their fingertips. Then a tiny pink human appeared in Nemr'll's palm.

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One small step for man, Nemr'll said as the tiny figure hesitantly reached one foot toward the rope while balancing precariously atop a slippery zylla rind. *One giant step for "Man"!*

K'rylln watched the human struggle to keep its balance. *Rillic!*

The matrix rippled with the Universal Laughter. He was beginning to understand.

Push.

After a restless night filled with strange dreams, Arthur slept through his alarm, then finally woke around noon with a grating headache. He'd given up on aspirin. His brain felt swollen, too big for the tightness of his skull.

He sat down to breakfast on toast and coffee in an empty house. No kids to fight over the Sunday funnies, he thought as he picked up the newspaper.

"Whose Are They?" Page one was full of the satellite story. Four more of them, forming a huge square around the equator. No one seemed to know what was happening.

He skipped to page two. Another fireman had died of cancer — the third from the crew that cleaned up the big PCB spill last year. The navy denied that radioactive wastewater had been dumped in the bay during the late forties. The huge oil slick from the tanker collision in the Gulf was coming ashore in Mexico. A Nobel scientist said that time was running out for the environment.

Time was running out. He thought of the Rabbit. Then of his wife. Sara thought he was losing it. Sure, he was under pressure, but he was nowhere near the edge . . . was he?

He gulped down more black coffee. The nagging pressure in his skull would not go away. That's how it started last time, he thought.

He had to get out of the house, get some fresh air. Without having realized it, he knew what he wanted to do: visit the Antioch Dump.

He drove out the old Pittsburg-Antioch Highway to downtown Antioch, and pulled into the Texaco station on West Tenth Street. A young man in grimy blue overalls sat outside the office with his feet propped up on a stool, listening to a Walkman. His long blond hair was matted with grease; what couldn't be tucked under his cap hung on his neck in a ponytail. "Those buggers're turnin'," he said as Arthur rolled down his window.

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"Pardon?"

"Those satellites're startin' to turn. Whole damn thing, like a big octa-heegon."

"Octahedron," said Arthur.

"You want gas?"

"No, thanks. I was hoping you knew where the dump is."

"Right on Somerville, then first left. Can't miss it — but it's closed today. Sunday."

"That's all right. Thanks." At least he could get a look at it.

He drove south on Somerville Road, past golden fields of foxtails shimmering in the summer breeze, then hundreds of acres of tract housing that hadn't been there in the seventies. He came to the first left and was suddenly at the dump.

Inside the chain-mail fence, he saw huge piles of garbage:, auto wrecks, burned-out appliances, broken furniture, paper, tires, tin cans, glass. Tons and tons of garbage. The roadside ditch was also filled with trash, spilling from burst plastic bags. Apparently people tossed their rubbish there when the dump happened to be closed.

He drove another hundred years to the entrance, then pulled off the road and parked in front of the chained-shut gates. Junk was piled everywhere. Some boys from the nearby houses had piled three torn-up mattresses by the road and were turning somersaults onto them.

He began walking along the roadway, taking care not to step on the broken glass. Looks like any other junkyard, he thought. He tried to imagine the canisters hidden beneath it.

A middle-aged jogger came huffing along and nodded as he passed. Then something splashed in the shallow water at the bottom of the ditch. One of the boys had tossed an empty beer bottle. Something caught Arthur's eye where the bottle had landed.

He edged down the slope for a closer look. The water in the ditch was an ugly bluish black. An oily muck was oozing from the base of the embankment. At the bottom of the ditch, a frog lay stretched out in the muck, surrounded by a silvery foam that seemed to drip from its mouth. The frog was dead. It took a moment, then, before Arthur understood that the frog had literally puked its guts out.

Arthur walked back to his car. The Rabbit was waiting in the front seat. Arthur did a double take: of course the front seat was empty.

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"Municipal Dump" — that was what they called it now, he thought as he drove home.

He could hear the Rabbit's voice in his head, replying: "A dump by any other name would smell as sweet."

They'd covered it with a mantle of "impervious" clay.

"You can't judge a book by its cover," said the Rabbit, who liked to mull over clichés.

Health officials had recommended a two-thousand-foot buffer zone between the buried wastes and the rapidly developing housing nearby. But he'd seen new tracts within two hundred feet of the dump. And in the ditch. . . .

"Curiouser and curiouser."

When he pulled into the driveway, he imagined that the Rabbit was following him to the front door. The pressure in his head was mounting. He climbed upstairs to the bathroom. Sara had left some Tylenol; maybe that would help. A pinpoint of light whined in the center of his skull like a grinder cutting into steel. He fumbled with the safety cap on the bottle, felt himself growing dizzy, turned, tried to make it to the bedroom. The point exploded into a pinwheel of light that filled his skull, burning away all possibility of resistance. His mind reached its limit, and he fell.

K'RYLLN STUDIED the yellow octahedron that hovered before him, enveloping the pale blue globe. Tiny golden triangles shimmered along its edges like static. The field was starting to revolve.

Many humans would suffer as the electromagnetic effects of the gravity funnel grew more intense on the surface of the planet. That, too, was part of Rill's plan. The mounting pressure would break down psychic barriers; as a result, the information he was coding into the field would be distorted by the buried contents of their minds. Some would not be able to handle it. Only a few would understand what had happened. But that's how it always was.

Nemr'll held the silvery pyramid that contained the images they were going to encode. K'rylln nodded.

Give them this day their scaly dread.

Nemr'll released the pyramid. It seemed to float through space toward the hovering planet. As it collided with the surface of the octahedral field,

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the entire image collapsed to a pinpoint of light, then exploded in a bright fountain of triangles. A new octahedron formed around the blue globe. The encoding was completed.

The octahedron began to move faster, blurring at the edges so that it looked like two yellow cones set base to base, enclosing the planet. When the field gained enough speed, the mouth of the tunnel would open. Then they would make the jump.

He was lying on the bedroom floor. The house was dark. He heard a soft paddling in the hallway and looked up. The Rabbit passed by the doorway.

Arthur sat up. His body was stiff from how he'd fallen. He still felt pressure in his head, but it was steady now; the pain was gone. It was so much easier not to resist. He heard a clopping noise, like someone jumping up and down on a board, and went downstairs to investigate.

The sound was coming from the garage. He opened the door quietly and peered into the darkness. The *Alice Liddell* had passengers.

He felt his way past the scattered suitcases and climbed into the boat. Two little fat men sat perfectly still at opposite ends of the vessel.

"If you think we're waxworks, you ought to pay, you know," said the one in the bow. "Waxworks weren't made to be looked at for nothing. Nohow!"

"Contrariwise," replied the voice behind him, "if you think we're alive, you should speak."

"I know what you're thinking," said Tweedledum, "but it ain't so, nohow."

"Contrariwise," added Tweedledee, "if it was so, it might be; and if it were so, it would be; but as it isn't, it ain't. That's logic."

"I fear I'm lost in this wood," Arthur said.

"Nohow!" cried Tweedledum. "'This wood,' says he. Noway! It's a boat, don't you see."

"Contrariwise," observed Tweedledee, "it's a boat *now*, but it was wood then." He rapped on the side of the boat with his knuckles. "Since it were so, it wood be — that's logic."

The two brothers giggled and clapped. "We've come to help you," they said.

"Very well, then. What should I do?"

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"The answer to *that* is perfectly clear," replied Tweedledum. "You should quit!"

"Contrariwise," objected Tweedledee, "if you quit, there'll be nothing left of you. You should stay."

"In short, it's perfectly clear what to do," they chimed. "Either quit, or don't quit — there's no other choice!"

"Put up—"

"—or shut up!"

"Like it—"

"—or lump it!"

"Love it—"

"—or leave it!"

They bounced up and down as they bantered and laughed, almost upsetting the boat.

"It's not clear at all," said Arthur.

"What could be clearer?" asked Tweedledum. "Either you quit—"

"—or you don't," concluded his brother — which began another round of chanting.

"Put up—"

"—or shut up!"

"Take it—"

"—or leave it!"

"Like it—"

"—or lump it!"

They twirled like tops: Tweedledum to the left, Tweedledee to the right, faster and faster until, whoosh!, they were gone.

The gray-haired old Rabbit, his waistcoat and fur matted with oil, sat in the bow of the boat. He looked at Arthur with great, sad eyes, then reached into his pocket and pulled out his watch. "It's getting very late," he said, shaking his head sadly.

"What's going to happen?" Claudia asked as Arthur and the Rabbit peered over her shoulder at Monday morning's front page. A diagram showed the huge octahedron formed by the satellites, revolving against the rotation of the Earth. All television and radio communication had been knocked out for twelve hours during the night. He didn't know what to say.

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He started toward his office, then stopped when the Rabbit gently touched his shoulder. "Would you ring Farnsworth for me, Claudia? Tell him I'd like to speak to him today. Tell him it's urgent."

The room was crowded. Farnsworth motioned for him to sit in the leather chair. The others all stood.

"So, Pendleton, I take it you've thought about our conversation?"

"Yes, sir, I have."

"Consider your verdict," the King said to the jury.

"Not yet, not yet!" the Rabbit hastily interrupted. "There's a great deal to come before that!"

"I still don't understand the company's position."

"Call the first witness," said the King.

The first witness was the Hatter. He held a teacup in his hand. "I beg pardon, Your Majesty, but I hadn't quite finished my tea."

"You ought to have finished!" said the King.

"Perhaps I can offer some clarification," said Farnsworth coldly.

"You said we are a business, not a charity," Arthur began. "Yet isn't our business to help people? Or do you mean to imply that only charities ought to help people?"

"What I mean to imply, Pendleton, is that business is business. In other words, it must show a profit. No profit, no business. Is that clear enough for you?"

"I'm afraid it can't be saved," murmured the Rabbit sadly, holding his tattered waistcoat above the desk.

"Brush it under the rug!" said the March Hare.

"Bury it!" cried the Hatter.

"Burn it!" ordered the King.

"But our business," insisted Arthur, "is to provide financial security. If we fail to do that — if we fail to honor our contracts — how long can our business last?"

"You should give some thought to your own financial security," Farnsworth snapped. "The company's profits pay your salary. No profit, no salary. Get it?" He paused to light a cigar and regain control of his temper. The Rabbit had placed his waistcoat in the ashtray, where it was ignited by Farnsworth's dying match. The room began to fill with foul smoke.

"I know how you feel, Pendleton; believe me, I do. We all want to help

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the other guy. But you have to look out for number one, too."

The room was silent. The jury stared at him.

Farnsworth leaned forward, as if confiding in him. "You've seen the charts, Arthur; you know how fast the cancer rate is rising. We *can't* honor all those claims. It would put us out of business."

Arthur was thinking of the woman in Antioch and her three kids. "What happens in the meantime?" he asked. "What happens to the people who need help now, who can't wait ten or fifteen years for the courts to decide who's accountable?"

"Where were those people twenty years ago, Pendleton? Clamoring for bigger cars and faster foods and nuclear power and everything else that makes for The Good Life. They can't come crying to me because they turned their heads the other way to food additives and toxic wastes and radiation. It was the price they were willing to pay."

"Guilty!" shouted the King.

"Guilty!" echoed the members of the jury.

The Dormouse, who'd been curled up asleep in the bookshelf, woke with a start. "Guilty!" he cried, as if he'd been listening.

Farnsworth punched the intercom button and told his secretary he was going to lunch. "Maybe you should take the rest of the week off, Pendleton."

"Do you mean he *should* take the rest of the week off?" asked the Hare.

"To think it over?" Arthur said sarcastically.

"Exactly so," replied Farnsworth.

"Then you should say what you mean," said the Hare.

"I do," Farnsworth spluttered. "At least, I mean what I say. That's the same thing."

"Not the same thing a bit!" said the Dormouse, waking again for a moment. "Why, you might as well say that 'I breathe when I sleep' is the same as 'I sleep when I breathe'!"

"You might as well say," said the Hare, "that 'I excrete what I eat' is the same as 'I eat what I excrete'!"

"You might as well say," added Arthur, "that 'I do what you like' is the same as 'I like what you do'!"

"As far as you're concerned, it *is* the same thing!" roared Farnsworth. "When *I* say something, Pendleton, it means exactly what I want it to mean — no more, no less." He ushered Arthur to the door. "The question

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is who's to be master, Pendleton. That's all the clarification you need."

Outside, a crowd had gathered in the plaza. Many wore bizarre costumes, as if it were Halloween. He spotted Claudia and stood beside her. She had several leaves pinned to her blouse and appeared to be dressed as a tree. "Mother Nature'll win in the end," she whispered. "She doesn't care; she's got plenty of time. Maybe she'll take a million years, clean herself up, start all over again. We'll be gone."

He looked around. A plump woman dressed as a ballerina smiled back at him. "Visitors from Space!" screamed the headline of the *National Enquirer* tucked under her arm. He continued scanning the crowd. Everywhere people carried newspapers bearing tidings of doom. "Acid Spill: Schoolchildren Evacuated." "Birth Defects Blamed on Dioxin in Drinking Water." "Pesticide Found in Cake Mix."

How could he have thought Farnsworth would listen to reason? And what would he do now?

"Ours is the first generation in history with the power to destroy the planet," a speaker shouted. A man wearing a San Francisco Giants baseball uniform began chanting, "Save the Earth! Save the Earth!" It was Joe Cantrell.

That night, Sara called and told him to turn on his TV. Eighty-one unidentified flying objects had appeared in the upper stratosphere above the North Pole. Silvery disks, each three hundred meters across. Not Soviet. Not Chinese.

The aliens were here.

He spoke to Sara, then to each of the kids. Chuck could barely contain himself. He wanted to run to Joey's house to hear what his father thought the invaders might do next, but Arthur told him to stay at home with Sara. Sophie seemed a little frightened. He reminded her what Miss Pickering had said about highly evolved beings.

Arthur's mind was boiling with the plots of a dozen Grade B thrillers he'd sat through with Chuckie: *Saviors from Space.* The benevolent aliens offer their superior technology to help solve Earth's problems. *They Came to Conquer the Earth.* The hostile aliens thrive on human pollution, so the nations of the world must unite to clean up the planet and repel the invaders. *Earth vs. the Plastic-Eaters.* The mindless aliens eat industrial

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wastes and are harnessed by heroic engineers to save the environment.

The pressure in his head was gone. He was left with the pieces of his life. Sara. The kids. Cantrell. A broken marriage. A job he could no longer believe in. Carroll.

He thought of his plan to re-create Dodgson's famous outing, and felt only sadness: for himself, for Sara, for what he'd let happen to them. He could not disown his fantasy life; his mistake had been not fighting harder for it.

Nemr'll stood beside the admiral on the ship's main bridge. K'rylln watched the shifting web of interlocking triangles on the command monitor. The fleet was positioned around the planet, awaiting his signal to begin.

"Thy zingdom come, thy Rill be done, on 'Earth' as it is in the heavens!" intoned Nemr'll.

K'rylln thought of the millions of creatures below, and felt the Universal Laughter rising within him.

"Push," he said.

ARTHUR WOKE rested the next morning, and flicked on the TV while he was brewing a fresh pot of coffee. The alien vessels had circled the Earth, and were stationed over many of our major cities. He turned the TV off, dressed, and went to the garage, where the *Alice Liddell* still floated on its sea of cardboard boxes and newspapers. He lifted the boat from its bed and hoisted it onto a trailer, then hitched the trailer to the back of his car and connected the brake lights. He went back into the house, washed his hands, and changed into his black coat, like the one that Dodgson had worn. Then he drove up the freeway toward the river. An old dirt road took him out to a flat slope below Seal Bluff Landing. From there he rolled the trailer down to the shore.

The narrow strip of sandy beach was separated from the water by a stretch of black, oily mud, strewn with candy wrappers, beer cans, and other garbage. The stench of rotting fish turned his stomach. Pesticides in the groundwater? Toxic runoff from the industries upstream? Human sewage flushed into the water? It was hard to believe he and Sara used to walk here, breathing the fresh air and planning their future together.

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He stepped into the muck, dragging the rowboat behind him until he reached the water. Then, trousers dripping, he climbed aboard and began rowing into the bay.

K'rylln watched the main viewscreen as the oblong bays beneath the command ship dilated and the huge vessel disgorged its black cargo. All around the planet, the same drama was being enacted.

K'rylln sighed as the canisters fell toward the ocean below. The ship's computers automatically switched to a view from the planet's surface, and a cheer went up from his crew as the thin metal cylinders plummeted into the water, spraying spumes of white foam as they shattered.

"'Tis *rillic* when the slimey troves gyre and gimbel in the waves!" shouted Nemr'll, possessed by the Laughter.

"*Rillic!*" answered the admiral.

His crew took up the cry. "*Rillic! Rillic!*"

He was Sebastian Close, on an outing of homage — to Dodgson, to his family, to his own inner life.

He was several hundred yards from the shore, when he heard a *clap!* like a giant hand slapping the water. He stopped rowing and turned to look over his shoulder, saw the column of foam rising up from the river, then the wave rushing toward him. He grabbed the oars and tried to turn the boat around, but the eight-foot wall of water caught him broadside and rolled the boat over. He didn't panic. He was a good swimmer, and let the crashing water twist him as the wave passed, but when he tried to swim to the surface, he was caught in an oily goop that clung to him like a net. He kicked harder, but remained in place. He was running out of breath. Clawing helplessly at the unresisting liquid, kicking and flailing and fighting for air, he sank.

And found himself in a damp cavern beneath the bay. The others were already there, huddled around a tiny light, no bigger than a firefly: the Tweedle brothers, for once not fighting; the Mad Hatter, quiet; the Dormouse, wide-awake; and, of course, the White Rabbit, gamely trying to make himself presentable.

"I think he'll see us now," said the Rabbit.

The tiny light began to spin like a pinwheel, showering them with shiny triangles of color, then suddenly exploded in a blinding burst of

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light. When they could see again, they stood before a dazzling silver throne.

The Frog King looked down upon them from his ornate throne. His pale green flesh seemed to glow in the darkness. His eyes flashed silver — cold, hard, alien eyes, yet somehow filled with wisdom and sadness. He was beautiful, Arthur thought.

"What is your complaint?" the King asked.

"We feel you have treated us shabbily," said the Rabbit, fussing with his waistcoat.

"*Shabbily*?" asked the Frog King.

"He means you oughtn't have dumped your garbage on our world," said Tweedledee.

"Noway," added his brother.

"But it's a dump, isn't it?" said the King.

"It most certainly is not!" said Arthur indignantly.

"You dump vile chemicals in the soil?"

"Well, yes. . . ."

"Dump nasty poisons in the sea?"

"Yes, but that's because —"

"Dump noxious fumes in the air?"

"Yes —"

"Well, then, must be *some* kind of dump!" shouted the King. His laughter rumbled through the cavern, echoed back, redoubled. "MUST BE *SOME* KIND OF DUMP!"

Then he pounded the sides of his throne, THWACK!, like a huge hand slapping the water, and everything went black.

"You're a lucky man, Mr. Pendleton," the nurse was saying. "That goop you fell into is harmless. Just sticks to everything and is heck to clean up."

"How do you feel!" asked Sara as she kissed him on the forehead.

"What happened?"

"They found you on the shore, half-buried in muck. It's a miracle you didn't drown."

"You swam ashore after the boat sank," added Sophie, seeing that he was confused.

"What muck?"

"From the spaceships!" Chuckie exclaimed. "They dropped this yucky

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stuff all over the planet!" Having a father who was a casualty of the alien invasion had propelled him to instant celebrity at school.

He looked at Sara.

"It's true. One of the canisters burst a few hundred yards from you. Thousands of gallons of oily sludge spewed into the river — they're still cleaning it up."

"And poison gas!" Chuckie added.

"Clouds of yellow vapor," Sara explained. "They say it stung pretty badly. Lots of headaches and nausea. Very few casualties — some traffic accidents, a few boats overturned." She clenched his hand tightly. "Thank God you're all right."

"The spaceships?"

"They dumped their garbage and left," Sophie said, obviously troubled.

Dumped their garbage? He thought of the millions who'd looked to the sky for salvation, only to be met with a load of garbage. Could it really be that simple? An intergalactic pie-in-the-face? Somehow, ominously, he knew there was more to it than that.

But maybe it would work. Maybe the cleanup would continue. If we wouldn't do it for our own sake, for the sake of our fellow creatures, our beautiful blue-green planet, maybe now, knowing there were others out there, we would do it to prove ourselves worthy of them.

He would help. He would start by notifying the authorities of what he'd discovered at the dump, and helping to organize the local citizenry to clean up the site once and for all. There'd be no quitting at Domestic, either. The insurance companies should be leading the fight for the environment — if it wasn't their first concern, at least it was in their own interest. If Farnsworth couldn't see that, he'd go over Farnsworth's head. This time he wouldn't give up without a fight.

"I'll pick you up first thing in the morning and take you home," Sara said. "We've got the house all ready for you."

"We?"

"I'm tired of living in Berkeley. I think we should all be together again."

"Sara? I'm going to fight Domestic."

"I know. I love you, Arthur."

"They may fire me."

"I love you."

"Careful. Whatever you say three times is true."

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"The Bellman's Rule of Three," she said as she leaned over to kiss him.

K'rylln sat before the meditation console, content. Rill had spoken through them. Another race had received the Laughter.

He thought of what lay ahead for the inhabitants of the planet.

At first there would be widespread relief: the aliens were gone, their actions apparently harmless. Sure, the alien goop would be hard to clean up — dispersed into fine particles, it would permeate everything. The world would be gray for a while, literally and figuratively, but would seem to be none the worse for it. They couldn't know yet that each complex organic molecule in the gray goop was interacting with the oxygen in their atmosphere to form two strands of living virus and a dioxinlike substance that would increase the enzyme levels in their bodies. Relief would simply give way to disappointment at the failure to make contact, which in turn would engender enthusiastic speculation about what had happened. Eventually things would return to normal.

For a while.

Then they would begin noticing the effects of the virus. Just a few simple changes in the genetic code — a molecule here, a strand there — but the results would be devastating.

The body's resistance to toxins would be lessened. Man would become more sensitive to his environment.

Many would die from poisoning or toxic shock. Aberrant behavior would be rampant. Those who survived would find their overworked immunological systems collapsing.

The cancer rate would multiply tenfold. New diseases would scour the planet. A host of hitherto-unknown "immune deficiency syndromes" would sweep through the dense population centers. The human race would be halved, or worse.

Or better. Much depended on how they reacted. Lives could be saved if they cleaned up the planet. Free will was an important part of Rill's plan. Wasn't He the Laughing God?

The Nuance-globe flickered softly. Nemr'll was reseeding the ship's Memory Gardens. They'd already begun monitoring a new planet.

K'rylln turned to the viewport and gazed out upon the stars. *Rillic*, he thought.

The Universe seemed to smile back at him.

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BOOKS

ALGIS BUDRYS

Kent Montana And The Really Ugly Thing From Mars, Lionel Fenn, Ace, $4.95

Pockets of Resistance and *The Hell-Bound Train*, Will Sundown, Popular Library, $4.95 each.

JUST EXACTLY why someone would want to title a book *Kent Montana And The Really Ugly Thing From Mars* is never adequately explained. I suppose they had to call it something; for that matter, why not title a book *Kent Montana And The Really Ugly Thing From Mars!* It has a certain charm. *Kent Montana And The* . . . . Well, never mind.

One thing this book is, without a doubt, is funny. Another thing it is is broad — it is broadly funny, that most delicate and dangerous of modes, seeming to invite any and all forms of sophomoric excess, actually requiring the author to walk a very fine line, indeed, if it is not to fall as surely as a souffle when the oven door slams. It ain't many people can make broad humor work. Lionel Fenn can.

That may come as a surprise to him. I know nothing about him, beyond his work, and for all I know he dashed this off in three days and considers that he is laughing all the way to the bank.* But even if he did, *Kent Montana And* . . . is a funny and successful book.

The book has to do with a really ugly thing, which crashes its spaceship on the outskirts of Gander Pond, New Jersey; with Kent Montana, who is an actor at liberty; with Chita Juarel, John Smith, Nicodemus Hooker, Casopia Gumpers (who is not bad to look at), Artie Chong, Sordette Biletto, and many other characters, not all of whom are still living at the end of this book. It really is a really ugly thing, and it kills without mercy. Fortunately . . . well, you knew there had to be a fortunately, didn't you?

* *So to speak. I don't imagine he will be able to retire on the proceeds of his Ace advance. On the other hand, it beats stealing; the penalties are as severe, to say the least, but they are seldom actually imposed.*

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I don't think there is an important bone in the body of *Kent Montana And The Really Ugly Thing From Mars.* But I would have felt bad if I hadn't called your attention to it. It's a funny book.

Now, then. First, *Pockets of Resistance,* by Will Sundown.

When I first heard of this book, about, I swear to God, fifteen years ago, it was called *Hovik's Day* and was by William Sanders, whom you may remember as the author of *Journey to Fusang.** Sundown Slim Sanders is an old bicycle racer, one-time folk guitarist who grummed up his hand while racing bicycles, and he has been a friend of mine, so to speak, for an astonishingly long time, considering his looks and disposition, and considering mine. Anyway, many many years ago I tried to sell an editor or two on publishing *Hovik's Day,* with absolutely no luck. Slim kept bitching and moaning and selling nonfiction books on folding canoes (which pay much better) and weird crap like that, and finally I gave up. Understand me, *Hovik's Day* was not *All Quiet on The Western Front,* but it was a decent manuscript about a totally apolitical but nevertheless very dangerous if you cross him guy named Hovik trying to stay alive in a totalitarian America, and I couldn't figure out why it didn't sell.

I still can't. But with a little bit of luck, the twentieth or fortieth editor bit on it, finally, and with a little bit of rewrite, and a new title, and a byline different from that of the science fiction writer, it is what it is. I think its sale came as a bit of a shock to Slim, but he had soldiered on, as is his wont. He still refuses to ride in cars, not simply preferring but insisting of riding his motorcycle, and the only thing that has changed, coincidentally, is that he has given up the family manse in Little Rock and gone to live with the Indians. But he would definitely have done that anyway — Slim does not sit well on civilization, a quality which I sometimes envy him.

Be that as it may, *Pockets of Resistance* tells the story of Frank-

* *What! You don't remember* Journey To Fusang? *Well, it came out about two years ago and was funny in* something *of the same way as* Kent Montana And ..., *although I shall probably hear from Slim about* that *comparison. And it was by William Sanders — William B. Sanders — and was edited by Brian Thomsen of Warner Books, as distinguished from the present two books we are discussing, which appear thinly disguised as survivalist novels, not science fiction. In this way, they will presumably reach a different audience, and possibly will go a longer way toward making Slim a moderately well off person. Or possibly not. Slim is waiting to find out.*

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lin Roosevelt Hovik, ex-Marine, ex-felon, and now, much to his disgust, a political prisoner through a combination of circumstances. Now, to his even greater disgust, he is on a labor gang from which Joe Jack Mad Bull (an Indian) is about to make his escape and furthermore wants Hovik to go with him. Jesus Christ!

It's not that Hovik likes the labor gang, and certainly it's not that he wouldn't like to get away from it. But he doesn't like the odds at this time, and though he likes Joe Jack Mad Bull well enough, he's not at all sure he wants to be associated with him.

Actually, Hovik is a dedicated loner. As for the two guards, who are from the United States Department of Internal Security and increasingly convinced that Blacktail Springs Correctional Camp is good duty, he's pretty sure that at least one of them is going to get killed, but on the other hand. . . .

Well, it goes pretty much according to Joe Jack Mad Bull's plan, except that Hovik does not, indeed, go along at this time. But the authorities take it very badly, and soon enough Hovik and a small number of other prisoners find themselves on board a panel truck bound for the mysterious camp 351, from which no one has ever returned.

But he never makes it all the way. Instead, he and a fellow prisoner break out, and after many adventures reach Oakland, where he and the fellow prisoner split up.

Meanwhile, The Old Man (Number 318), who has been a prisoner at Blacktail Springs longer than anyone can remember, is summoned by a gray emminence and taken to Camp 351. There is a lot of funky stuff, and The Old Man breaks out, wearing a good suit and driving a car.

Meanwhile, the fellow prisoner makes a mistake while on his way to his girl's house, is recaptured, and eventually brought to Camp 351.

Meanwhile, Hovik, too, makes a nearly fatal error, but gets away. He heads for the fellow prisoner's address — that is, the girlfriend's — and surprises the bejesus out of her; the fellow prisoner of course has not checked in; in fact, Hovik brings her the first solid news of him in years.

Shortly, the Resistance is called in to help Hovik and the girl. It responds in the form of a weary assassin who does, after a while, get them out. But the assassin reflects the spirit of the Resistance; cautious, not very effective, and, once again, cautious.

Well, you're wondering. Yes, Hovik unexpectedly makes a rendezvous with Joe Jack Mad Bull.

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Number 318 makes a rendezvous with both of them. In fact, with four of them; not only is the fellow prisoner's girl, Judy, now more or less attached to Hovik, they have also been joined by the tired old assassin from the Resistance, who doesn't dare go back not because of the United States establishment but because the Resistance has taken to cleaning out the old hands.

What this is, in large part, is a process novel — the process being the politicization of Hovik, who begins as a sort of a thug but ends by leading a task force against Camp 351. But it has many other features, including the reappearance of the fellow prisoner, who it turns out is a computer hacker extraordinaire, even though he's dying. In the end, for instance, a plague is released from Camp 351, genetically tailored, which will kill up to 100% of the human race. Only the ones who get the message put out by the dying hacker, and use it to make the vaccine, will stand a chance. And Hovik and Judy and Joe Jack Mad Bull ride off into the sunset.

Which is fine as far as the novel is concerned. It's a good book, in some ways an unusual book, but in one way it's particularly unusual: It says the slide toward institutional totalitarianism in the United States (and elsewhere) can't be reversed. We have to wipe the slate clean and start over.

It's unusual because it doesn't come up with a fictional solution. Hovik and company wipe out Camp 351, but, although it is the home of the secret and effective experiments with the plague, it is just one fly-speck on the map of the United States. Simply wiping it out — which was done in an attempt to rescue the fellow prisoner, as far as Hovik was concerned — actually affects the United States hardly at all, and, if it were not for the plague, retribution would be swift and effective. We have already seen that the resistance is a sort of joke; there is no escape from the United States which we can take as a species of token for the whole world. Except the plague. We wipe the slate clean, except for those swift enough to provide themselves with the vaccine, and the natural resistors, and we start over.

What do we get?

Well, part of the answer is in *The Hell-Bound Train.* In it, Hovik is ten years older, and the plague has had its effect, so to speak. What I mean by so to speak is this:

Ten years is by no means long enough to judge the effect — every one of the survivors is still tied to the old way of life, and no child is more than ten years old. Furthermore, even when grown, the after-

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the-plague children will still live in the shadow of the technological civilization that was. In fact, I suspect that by the time 20th century technology has fallen away entirely, we will have repopulated the world, restored technology, restored the old repressive institutions under new names, and be back to doing business as usual. The plague will prove to have been a respite; a brief period in which a man or woman had elbow room, provided they didn't swing in certain directions, and now we are back to the old way of standing within everyone else's arm's length. In other words, I'm not at all sure Slim has provided us with a solution.

Nor, I suspect, is Slim. He has simply provided us with a slice of realism — allowing, of course, for dramatic fugues in between the realism.

I think Slim really believes the world is sliding toward truly oppressive totalitarianism, faster than most of us think. (Is there anyone credible who thinks the world is sliding toward liberalism?) Furthermore, he thinks so in a realistic way — most people applaud the trend, and certainly most people would be horrified by Hovik, even more than they are horrified by Joe Jack Mad Bull, say, who after all is a heathen savage *imprimis* and hasn't had the opportunity to learn better.*

However that actually is, in *The Hell-Bound Train* we find a new character leading off, in the shape of Mackenzie, a former astronaut, who buries his wife — but not the three men who jumped her while Mackenzie was away hunting — and who packs his gear and takes off on foot, eventually finding a bicycle which makes his way much faster, which means it is not long before he is captured by the troops of Major — now General — Decker, leader of the Army of America, who has actually gotten an armored train rolling.

Decker, it seems, apart from being a pederast, has been putting the train together for a long time, building up its rolling stock bit by bit, roaming the Southwest, for a most part, but now heading up north, because he has heard of a particular cache of weapons he wants to get hold of. At this point, Decker's train consists of a point buggy — an independent car that goes down the track first — and then the main train, which, aside from various short and long range

* *He isn't and he has; I was merely repeating the mindset of most Americans, truly, who don't read* F&SF, *or who, if they did, would be seriously upset by it. Of course, if I wasn't almost as scared of knee-jerk liberals, I wouldn't have had to put this footnote in, would I!*

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weapons, and the men of the Army, houses several wagons full of prisoners who are there to fix the track as the train proceeds. It is to these prisoners that Mackenzie is added. In short order, he gets to meet Alice, an Indian maiden, and they sort of take up with each other.

Hovik, meanwhile, is having small adventures along with Joe Jack Mad Bull, ten years older than when we saw him last, and more or less minding his own business, until word of the train gradually filters through. And then, after many adventures, Hovik wrecks the train, and kills General Decker, because at this point the train is loaded with weapons from the cache, and these include nuclear weapons. Decker would have used them to assert hegemony over half the former United States, and Hovik won't have that, basically because it would have included hegemony over him and his.

When last seen, by the way, the train is lying at the bottom of a ravine, washed by a stream, and there is some talk of warning the folks downstream that their water supply is apt to be loaded with plutonium oxides, as well as being probably hotter than is usual. But in actual fact, there is going to have to be at least one more book in which these weapons are disposed of finally, somehow. Nuclear weapons, unfortunately, are not killed simply dumping them into a ravine . . and Slim knows that, too. It will be interesting to see if he knows how to dispose them safely. (I don't)

Now, the thing is, first of all, these books are seriously intended. Not that Slim won't stop now and then and have fun, although not in the free-swinging style of *Journey to Fusang*. But page in, page out, they are seriously intended, which places them a cut above the usual survivalist novel and invites your attention.

Second of all, Slim makes clear, in both books, how much he loathes Survivalists. So be careful in categorizing these books.

Third, in *The Hell-Bound Train*, a character named Grimsaw becomes Bradshaw for a chapter, then revers to Gimshaw. I hope some copy-editor caught it at the last moment — this review is written from galleys — but I don't hold out much hope.

Fourth, *Pockets of Resistance* is dedicated to me, and to all the busy people in Washington who make books like *Pockets* necessary; *The Hell-Bound Train* is dedicated to "All my family and friends of the Kiowa Tribe." Slim really is, underneath it all, a genuine rebel.

We do not have enough of those.

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This brisk and amusing tale about a librarian who had all the answers comes from a Seattle writer who has been published in Asimov's, Pulphouse *and* Universe *and who says that "Most of my stories are humor of one sort or another," a quality which will endear her to the readers who ask us to lighten up these pages. We'd love to!*

She Could Look It Up

By Deborah Wessell

CALL ME MARIAN.

No, really. It's the "M." in M. Alice Forrester. I don't use it much anymore, because of the memories. . . .

You see, I used to be a librarian.

Oh, I guess it is funny, Marian the Librarian, though it used to irritate the hell out of me when people made clever little jokes. I thought about changing it once, but it was my name, and my job. I liked being a librarian. I don't know why everyone assumes it's boring. How would you like it if people kept saying, "Oh, but isn't it boring?" about your job? And these were the folks in the real glamour occupations, too — like, my dental hygienist asked me that once, and the guy who hosed down the celery at Safeway. Honestly. O.K., I admit it wasn't the excitement and the attraction I have now, but it was a good life.

That is, until I started getting everything right.

It was a hot Thursday afternoon in August, muggy the way it gets in Minnesota, till you feel like you have to shove the air out of the way just

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to walk around. I remember the sound of the ceiling fans, and the dusty bars of sunlight slicing across the reading room of the suburban library where I worked. There were yellow roses in a vase on the reference desk, and I remember feeling crowded, as if the vase would tip over if I flipped open an atlas or grabbed for the phone too fast. These days, of course, I'm used to every kind of weather, but back then, humidity made me nuts.

I was alone on the desk that day; we were shorthanded. I had the usual readers wanting mysteries, the latest gothic, *Road & Track*. And one nice old green-eyed guy, shabby but sober, who came in every afternoon and looked at travel books about Ireland. In fact, we called him the Irishman. He probably didn't have bus fare in his pocket, but he'd worked out an imaginary itinerary, right down to the last shamrock. Some of the staff got tired of him, but, hell, he just wanted a clean, well-lit place to daydream in. At least, that's what I thought at the time. He used to call me the best librarian in the game, as a joke. Some joke.

That Thursday he seemed especially happy with a new literary guide to Dublin I showed him. He leafed through it with long, trembling hands, smiling and nodding, then looked at me bright-eyed.

"Did you order this just for me? You're so kind."

"No problem," I said, feeling a little uneasy about the dent I'd been making in the book budget lately. "I probably would have bought it anyway."

"So very kind. I shall return the favor." He chuckled slowly, like a clock ticking. "Indeed I shall."

I didn't make much of it then, and anyway, things got busy. There were a few phone calls, but mostly people came to the desk, polite or pushy or timid, but all with questions:

"How do I research my family tree?"

"My boss wants the prime rate by month for the past five years, and I'm in a hurry."

"Do you know who said, 'An ethical man is a Christian holding four aces'?"

"Do you know where I can find pictures of buildings designed by Arthur Erickson?"

"I need the words to the Canadian national anthem."

"Do you know the year Charlemagne was born?"

Do you know . . . the thing is, I did know. I mean, I knew where to look:

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the books fell open to the right pages; I flipped to exactly the right catalog cards without trying. I found the Mark Twain quote right off the bat, and I even turned up a file of clippings on Erickson that should have been upstairs in Art & Architecture. Every single piece of information they asked for was right there where I reached for it. Charlemagne's birth date was the weirdest; I felt like I already knew it. I still know it, after all this time: A.D. 742. And the words to "O Canada," right from "Our home and native land" to "I stand on guard for thee." Nice tune.

It started innocently enough, all right. I never suspected where it was leading. When Sylvia relieved me at the desk that Thursday and asked how it was going, I just laughed, told her I was on a roll. Some days were like that, after all. Nobody asked you a question you couldn't answer. Other days, you couldn't give the right directions to the men's room. ("The door next to Women," you'd say. "No, not Women Staff Only, the other one." People don't listen.) So I put Thursday down to luck, even though I'd never been that lucky before. On my way out, the Irishman looked up from *Back Roads of County Clare* and smiled at me. I remember thinking he had young eyes, for an old man.

The next day, Friday, I had a budget committee meeting, so Sylvia took my desk hours. My boss, the Little Tin God, was even longer-winded than usual, and the meeting staggered on until almost five. I was heading for my office to wrap up for the weekend, when I noticed a landscaped blonde in expensive linen standing at the reference desk. She was checking her watch and sighing, the way some people do when they've had to wait all of two minutes. I almost passed her by, but Sylvia was tied up at the encyclopedias with a couple of sullen high school kids, and anyway, fair's fair. Just because the blonde wasn't a nice old bum didn't mean I could be rude. I was doing my Can-I-help-you, when I saw the Irishman over her shoulder. He had a heap of maps fanned out on a table, but he wasn't looking at them. He was watching me and smiling.

"— just looks like an old trumpet to me," the blonde was saying. She had a voice like a mosquito. "But my husband insists it's something else, perhaps a valuable antique."

She was holding out a snapshot of a musical instrument lying on someone's dining room table. Now, I swear I don't know a Stradivarius from a kazoo, but all I had to do was glance at the thing, and there were words coming out of my mouth.

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"It's a sackbut." I waited for one or the other of us to laugh, but we didn't. "It's a medieval precursor of the modern trombone."

I led her to a book on baroque and Renaissance music, and sure enough, there among the krummhorns and the violas da gamba was a goddamn sackbut, just like in her photograph. I left her with the book and drove home, fast. Even with the top down, I could hardly breathe.

When I got to my apartment, the door was unlocked, and Warren was standing in the kitchen with his tie pulled loose, drinking my last cold beer and looking over my mail. Warren was a CPA with some very irritating habits, but he was gorgeous, all chestnut hair and jawline and smoldering eyes. I mean, his eyes smoldered when he read the sports section; it was just in him. The first time I saw him, waving his shirt over his head at a play-off game the year the Twins won the Series, I thought, "Well, he can eat crackers in my bed." And I guess it was mutual, because that night — why is it, anyway, that people see librarians as spinsters in bifocals and orthopedic hairnets? Like they're all Donna Reed in *It's a Wonderful Life*, but without Jimmy Stewart to rescue them from cardigan sweaters and myopia. It's all dark suits for me now, of course, but back then, I never even owned a cardigan sweater.

Anyway, I got home that night, and Warren was there.

"Listen," I said, out of breath from the stairs, "the most incredible thing just happened to me!"

"You mean it's about to happen to you," he said, smoldering.

"Dream on, drugstore cowboy." I gave him back his hands. "I haven't even had a beer yet. And besides, this is really wild."

"Wild isn't the word, kiddo. Remember that lacy thing you wore last Sunday? How about if you. . . ?"

I finally got Warren's attention, about an hour after he'd gotten mine. (I love lace.) So while we fixed dinner, I told him about Mark Twain and Charlemagne, and the blonde and her sackbut. I almost told him about the Irishman, but by that time, Warren was getting theatrically skeptical, and I decided there wasn't really much to tell.

"So all you're saying is, you answered a lot of questions."

"Right, but —"

"But it's your job to answer questions. You've had a lot of practice being right. So why should it surprise you if —"

"It's not my job to be right all the time!" He was always auditing my

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arguments like that. "I'm telling you, this is bizarre!"

"And I'm telling you it was coincidence, and the heat's getting to you. Why'd you make lasagna, anyway? Isn't it hot enough in here already?"

"It was the only thing in the freezer, and if you don't like it, you can freeload somewhere else!"

We glared at each other, him with his hands full of wet lettuce, and me with a white-knuckle grip on a bottle of Chianti and a corkscrew. Then the oven timer rang the end of the round, and we set the table in silence. I started feeling sheepish, though, so I made conversation.

"Look at this," I said, pulling the plastic trough of lasagna out of the oven. "It's all red-and-white checks, just like the tablecloths in Italian restaurants. Guido's Freezeria."

Warren looked at me deadpan, then went over and peered into the cardboard box it had come in.

"What are you looking for?"

"The teeny-tiny violinist." He grinned gorgeously. "And the itty-bitty cigarette machine."

So we laughed and drank Chianti, and I forgot about being right until Monday morning. After that, I never forgot it for a moment.

IT STAYED hot all weekend, and on Monday the library felt like the inside of a car trunk. The yellow roses were still on the reference desk, dead as fish. I was dumping them, when the Little Tin God came by.

"How nice to see you here on time," he said. His real name was Carmichael, and he resembled his own neckties: nasty, brutish, and short. Besides, he was a Mets fan. I didn't reply.

"Miss Kramer had an unfortunate weekend," he continued. "Car trouble on her canoeing trip."

"Kayaking." Carmichael hated to be corrected, so I did it often. "Sylvia doesn't canoe; she kayaks."

"Whatever. She's stranded somewhere called Muskeg Bay until the garage sends for parts."

Poor Syl. I'd been through those little towns up in the Boundary Waters area: forty miles past Resume Speed, and not a hope in hell they'd stock her brand of gin. Then it dawned on me that Alan, our other reference librarian, was back East for a week, which meant. . . .

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"I'm afraid you'll be covering the desk until she returns." Carmichael smirked up at me. I had four inches on him at least, and he hated that, too.

"With your help, of course?" I asked him. My eye.

"Miss Forrester," he said, "Miss Forrester, I will be meeting all week with the county library board about the merger proposal. Critical negotiations: a budget presentation, salary reviews. . . ."

For the sake of my own salary, I bit my tongue and got to work. I was all for merging our little system with Hennepin County's, if only on the chance that it would dilute the Tin God's authority, but of course, he wasn't asking my opinion. He was the only one who wasn't, though. By eleven o'clock, it was ninety-four degrees in there, and the nightmare had started.

Questions and answers. Everybody in town had a question that day, and I had answers for every last one of them. Book titles leaped from the card catalog; statistics beckoned to me from reference books; information whispered from the depths of the clipping files. I found myself racing to look up the answers before they appeared in my mind, and wishing that I'd get something wrong. But no. You want a treatise on housing in Korea? Right here, sir. The consumer price index since 1960? Certainly, as a table or a graph? Zeno of Citium? Well, if you're doing your paper on philosophical paradoxes, it's Zeno the Eleatic you want to read about. Yes, ma'am, planting spinach? Rich soil and good drainage, that's what you want. The last great buffalo slaughter in the West? Around 1882, wouldn't you say? No, just a guess. Rubies, that's right: "Her worth is above rubies," although the New English Bible says coral. Proverbs 31:10. No, really, just a lucky guess.

The worst of it was, all day long no one noticed anything out of the ordinary except me. Man, woman, and child, they cruised in with one question each, thanked me for the answer, remarked on the heat wave, and cruised out again. You know, a psychologist said on the news a while ago that schizophrenia was a disease affecting loners, people in solitary occupations, like cowboys and librarians. Maybe cowboys work alone, but who do you suppose asks librarians all those questions, Texas longhorns? For crying out loud. Anyway, I had people in and out all day, but only the Irishman stayed put, watching me from across the airless reading room. I avoided his eyes and prayed for five o'clock. When it finally came, I drove home in a daze and fell asleep on the couch in my wilted clothes. I

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remember lying there, stupid from the heat and the strangeness, listening to the homey sound of the ball game on the radio, and thinking I'd be all right once it cooled off.

It didn't cool off. Tuesday morning the trees stood immobile in the hazy sun, the streets breathed heat, and everybody was driving like somebody from out of town. I got to work early, hoping that Sylvia was back.

"Thurday at the earliest," Carmichael told me. "I trust you can handle the desk until then?"

Handle it, hell. Tuesday was more of the same, and by Wednesday I didn't even open the damn books. I just answered every question I heard, as if I'd been asked the time of day or my middle name instead of the rule against perpetuities or the adjustable-rate mortgage index. Two eight-hour stretches of answering questions and sweating. Just once I thought I had it licked, when a guy called from a bar to settle a bet.

"Lissen!" he roared, "Tony here says Ty Cobb was the oldest player to lead the league in batting, and I say twenny dollars it was Ted Williams. Who was it?"

"Williams," I said mechanically. I would have known it anyway — I know baseball — but in this strange new state of affairs, I knew precisely. "It was Ted Williams. He was forty years old. Batted .328 and beat out his teammate, Pete Runnels."

"Awright! You tell Tony, O.K.? He won't believe me."

He put his buddy on the line, and with sudden inspiration, I gathered my strength and forced the words out: "Tony? Tony, it was Ty Cobb! You win!"

And I cackled like a maniac as I slammed down the phone. A wrong answer! I was free! But then the phone was ringing, my hand was creeping toward it, and I heard my voice saying, "I'm sorry, I was joking. You were right: Ted Williams. Sure, I'll tell Tony. Put him on."

The Irishman approached the desk as I gently hung up the phone.

"How far is it, from Kilkenny to Kildare?" he asked.

"Fifty-five miles," I said, looking into those emerald eyes. "How do I *know* that?"

He patted my hand. "You're the best in the game."

Before I could answer, a young guy in wraparound shades strolled over and said, "I know this is off-the-wall, but there's this Danny Kaye movie,

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The Court Jester? Well, in this one scene, he sings kind of a rhyme, and I was wondering—"

"'The pellet with the poison's in the vessel with the pestle,'" I told him. "'The chalice from the palace has the brew that is true.'"

"How nice," said the Irishman, as the guy reeled out of the room.

Nice, he says. I went into Women Staff Only and threw up. Then I drove home and called Warren. We didn't usually see each other during the week — too exhausting, he said, though I suspected he had somebody else — but this was an emergency. I didn't want smolder; I wanted help. I had him meet me at a tavern near the U of M, a writers' hangout called The Space Bar & Grill. We sat under the air-conditioner vent, and I told him the whole story, including the Irishman's remark about returning the favor. I took a pitcher of beer to get through it, and Warren started fidgeting before the foam was gone.

"So you're always right. So what's the problem?"

"What's the problem? I want to help people with their research; I don't want to read their minds. What if someone asks me about the existence of God, or the end of the world? The perfect librarian — it's just too dangerous; it's like having a loaded gun in the house—"

"Have you had any vacation yet this year? You've been really touchy lately, and now this. Um, I've got to get up early tomorrow—"

"Warren, you're not listening to me!" I started crying. Maybe I was cracking up. Book Woman Slays Six, Then Self, in Library of Doom.

"Of course I'm listening," he said, "and you sound very tired. Why don't I take you home?"

So he did, and the sight of him driving away was the last I ever had of him, the bum. I should have known he was a fair-weather friend. He started rooting for the Twins only during the play-offs. Acted like he owned the team when they won the Series, then the next year I could hardly get him to a game. Anyway, he drove me home, and I had bad dreams about Danny Kaye and green eyes.

When I woke up Thursday, there were storm clouds marching in, and the heat had pressure behind it. I'd overslept by hours, but I moved slow, trying not to think. I couldn't seem to remember how to drive my car, so I left it with the door open and the wipers going, and took a bus. Someone asked me if it was a local or an express, and by the time I told her the entire weekday and weekend schedule, the exceptions for holidays, and

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the alternate routes in case of snow, it was time to get off. I was so thrilled to see Sylvia on the library steps that I hugged her till her glasses fell off.

"What's your problem?" she snarled.

"No problem, Syl. I'm haunted, that's all."

"You're haunted. Have you ever been to Muskeg Bay? Do you know—"

"How small it is? Two thousand, four hundred and thirty-six souls. Elevation forty-nine feet."

"What?!"

"I'm right, you know. Ask all those longhorns in there; I'm always right about their questions. Always!"

Sylvia was trying to steer me into my office, but I wasn't having any. I wanted the Irishman. I wanted to ask him a question. He wasn't in the reading room, but I knew he was somewhere in the library. I could feel him waiting for me. Thunder murmured through the walls as I started to search, and the sky outside was a strange yellowy gray. He wasn't in the children's section, or fiction, or the meeting room upstairs. It started to rain, one thudding drop and then another. Not in Sylvia's office, or Alan's, or the Tin God's. It rained harder. I saw Sylvia heading for the main conference room; she beckoned to me, but I kept going. Not in the newspaper storage in the attic, or the janitor's basement workroom. The thunder was closing in, and the air was buzzing. Not in the locked stacks in the old wing. It was getting dim, like dusk falling in the middle of the day. Dazed, I wandered back to the reading room.

The Irishman was standing patiently at the reference desk, looking shabby and contented as always. He was stroking the petals of a bouquet of blood-colored roses. His hands didn't tremble at all. As I neared him, the thunder growled, and I had to wait a moment to speak.

"What's happening to me?"

"Do you like my gift?" he asked, blinking his emerald eyes. At first I thought he meant the flowers. Then I understood.

"Your gift? You *gave* me this, this whatever-it-is? Is it permanent? Am I always going to know the truth about everything?"

"The truth?" The green eyes narrowed in amusement. "Dear me, no. That could be dangerous. Not the truth. Just the facts."

I'd opened my mouth to reply, when lightning slammed the sky apart, and thunder exploded and rolled through the room. There was a second, smaller crash: shattered glass and water and roses on the floor at my feet. I

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knelt to pick up a petal, and when I stood up, he was gone. Simply not there.

The room was empty and ordinary, just a little dim from the rain clouds. Just a summer storm. Just a bad dream? But then someone walked in and asked me about Perkin Warbeck.

Now, everybody knows about Perkin Warbeck, right? Fifteenth-century pretenders to the English throne are always on the tip of your tongue, right? Haunted, haunted, haunted. I told him all about Perkin bloody Warbeck, and then I sprinted down the corridor to the conference room, where Carmichael was meeting with the county library board. I told them I was the best librarian on the planet, but that I needed a leave of absence, and while they were at it, a raise. I put in a good word for Sylvia, who sat there rolling her eyes, and treated them to a pithy character sketch of the Little Tin God, using words like "overbearing" and "incompetent." It seemed like a good idea at the time.

I WAS FIRED, of course, though they called it indefinite leave and said vague things about stress. Another book woman bites the dust.

I holed up for a while in my apartment, trying to figure out what had happened and what to do next. And how to support myself while I was figuring. You just don't make it as a waitress if people say, "How's the fish tonight?" and you *tell* them.

Besides, I was a lousy waitress and a worse typist. Truth is, I wasn't trying very hard. There was nothing I really wanted to do, whether it meant being right or not. I had the facts, but I didn't seem to have a heart's desire. Certainly Warren wasn't it; I didn't even react when I heard from Sylvia that he'd taken up with a flight attendant. She wore glasses and a bun, but at least she wasn't obsessed with answers. I just shrugged and went on reading the want ads during the commercials on the soaps.

It was actually Carmichael who gave me my big break. He asked me the right question, and I gave him the answer. Thanks to Carmichael, I found my true vocation, I made a little history, and I get a lot of satisfaction out of being right. Good old Carmichael. I spotted him hunched in a corner booth at the Space Bar when I wandered in one chilly September night. The heat wave was long gone, broken by that summer storm.

"You," said Carmichael. He was plastered.

I sat down across from him; that's how lonely I was.

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"You," he said again. "This is your fault."

"What is?"

"I never wanted that job anyway! Director of the library, big deal!"

He ranted for a while, and I got the picture: the town library had thrown in with the county, and he'd been eased out.

"Lousy job anyway," he sniffled. "Librarian. If only I'd had the career I really wanted."

"What's that?"

"If only I knew how to get it . . . a job like that, a great job. . . ."

"What job, Carmichael?" I had to know. Because somehow it was clear, clear as emeralds, that the job Carmichael was raving about would be the perfect one for me.

He stared at me blearily, and then he told me what job. And he asked me how to get it. I knew, of course. The minute he asked me, I knew the right answer. So I told him: how to start, what to read, whom to talk to. I would have sworn you couldn't land a job like that, starting out so late in life, but nobody had ever asked, had they?

Carmichael, bless his black heart, fell asleep on the table while I was answering, and forgot all about it. But once I'd given him the facts, I used them myself, to get where I am today. It's a long way from libraries, and it was tough going, but I'm still the best in the game. It's not a big place in history, but I'll always be there in the record books: the first woman umpire in the major leagues.

I love this life. That's what I tell Sylvia in the postcards I send her from stadiums all over the country. I love the game, I love the guys — some of them — but most of all, I love being right. Standing guard at home plate, waiting for the collision as the catcher lunges to cut off a throw from left field, the runner pounding in from third like a freight train, the fans screaming, a split second and a bare inch between safe and out, win and lose . . . and when they all turn to me, I'll make the call, and I'll make it right.

And now I've got a new heart's desire: to be the first woman umpire to call a game in the World Series. I'll get there, too, someday. And then, someday down the line, a couple of guys will be arguing in a bar, and one of them will roar, "Twenny bucks says it was Alice Forrester!" And he'll call the local library to settle the bet. The librarian might not be a baseball fan, so she might not know the answer right off the bat. But she could look it up.

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"Buffalo" will be published later this year in an anthology of autobiographical, "hometown" SF titled FIRES OF THE PAST, edited by Anne Jordan. It's a fascinating and unusual tale, involving H. G. Wells and Duke Ellington, among others, and set in Buffalo, New York.

BUFFALO

By John Kessel

IN MAY 1934 H.G. WELLS made a trip to the United States, where he visited Washington, D.C. and met with President Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Wells, 68 years old, hoped the New Deal might herald a revolutionary change in the U.S. economy, a step forward in an "Open Conspiracy" of rational thinkers that would culminate in a world socialist state. For forty years he'd subordinated every scrap of his artistic ambition to promoting this vision. But by 1934 Wells's optimism, along with his energy for saving the world, was waning.

While in Washington he requested to see something of the new social welfare agencies, and Harold Ickes, Roosevelt's Interior Secretary, arranged for Wells to visit a Civilian Conservation Corps camp at Fort Hunt, Virginia.

It happens that at that time my father was a CCC member at that camp. From his boyhood he had been a reader of adventure stories; he was

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a big fan of Edgar Rice Burroughs, and of H.G. Wells. This is the story of their encounter, which never took place.

In Buffalo it's cold, but here the trees are in bloom, the mockingbirds sing in the mornings, and the sweat the men work up clearing brush, planting dogwoods and cutting roads is wafted away by warm breeze. Two hundred of them live in the Fort Hunt barracks high on the bluff above the Virginia side of the Potomac. They wear surplus army uniforms. In the morning, after a breakfast of grits, Sgt. Sauter musters them up in the parade yard, they climb onto trucks and are driven by forest service men out to wherever they're to work that day.

For several weeks Kessel's squad has been working along the river road, clearing rest stops and turnarounds. The tall pines have shallow root systems, and spring rain has softened the earth to the point where wind is forever knocking trees across the road. While most of the men work on the ground, a couple are sent up to cut off the tops of the pines adjoining the road, so if they do fall, they won't block it. Most of the men claim to be afraid of heights. Kessel isn't. A year or two ago back in Michigan he worked in a logging camp. It's hard work, but he is used to hard work. And at least he's out of Buffalo.

The truck rumbles and jounces out the river road, that's going to be the George Washington Memorial Parkway in our time, once the WPA project that will build it gets started. The humid air is cool now, but it will be hot again today, in the 80s. A couple of the guys get into a debate about whether the feds will ever catch Dillinger. Some others talk women. They're planning to go into Washington on the weekend and check out the dance halls. Kessel likes to dance; he's a good dancer. The fox-trot, the lindy hop. When he gets drunk he likes to sing, and has a ready wit. He talks a lot more, kids the girls.

When they get to the site the foreman sets most of the men to work clearing the roadside for a scenic overlook. Kessel straps on a climbing belt, takes an axe and climbs his first tree. The first twenty feet are limbless, then climbing gets trickier. He looks down only enough to estimate when he's gotten high enough. He sets himself, cleats biting into the shoulder of a lower limb, and chops away at the road side of the trunk. There's a trick to cutting the top so that it falls the right way. When he's got it ready to go he calls down to warn the men below. Then a few quick

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bites of the axe on the opposite side of the cut, a shove, a crack and the top starts to go. He braces his legs, ducks his head and grips the trunk. The treetop skids off and the bole of the pine waves ponderously back and forth, with Kessel swinging at its end like an ant on a metronome. After the pine stops swinging he shinnies down and climbs the next tree.

He's good at this work, efficient, careful. He's not a particularly strong man — slender, not burly — but even in his youth he shows the attention to detail that, as a boy, I remember seeing when he built our house.

The squad works through the morning, then breaks for lunch from the mess truck. The men are always complaining about the food, and how there isn't enough of it, but until recently a lot of them were living in Hoovervilles — shack cities — and eating nothing at all. As they're eating a couple of the guys rag Kessel for working too fast. "What do you expect from a yankee?" one of the southern boys says.

"He ain't a yankee. He's a polack."

Kessel tries to ignore them.

"Whyn't you lay off him, Turkel?" says Cole, one of Kessel's buddies.

Turkel is a big blond guy from Chicago. Some say he joined the CCCs to duck an armed robbery rap. "He works too hard," Turkel says. "He makes us look bad."

"Don't have to work much to make you look bad, Lou," Cole says. The others laugh, and Kessel appreciates it. "Give Jack some credit. At least he had enough sense to come down out of Buffalo." More laughter.

"There's nothing wrong with Buffalo," Kessel says.

"Except fifty thousand out-of-work polacks," Turkel says.

"I guess you got no out-of-work people in Chicago," Kessel says. "You just joined for the exercise."

"Except he's not getting any exercise, if he can help it!" Cole says.

The foreman comes by and tells them to get back to work. Kessel climbs another tree, stung by Turkel's charge. What kind of man complains if someone else works hard? It only shows how even decent guys have to put up with assholes dragging them down. But it's nothing new. He's seen it before, back in Buffalo.

Buffalo, New York, is the symbolic home of this story. In the years preceeding the First World War it grew into one of the great industrial metropolises of the United States. Located where Lake Erie flows into the Niagara River, strategically close to cheap electricity from Niagara Falls

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and cheap transportation by lakeboat from the midwest, it was a center of steel, automobiles, chemicals, grain milling and brewing. Its major employers — Bethlehem Steel, Ford, Pierce Arrow, Gold Medal Flour, the National Biscuit Company, Ralston Purina, Quaker Oats, National Aniline — drew thousands of immigrants like Kessel's family. Along Delaware Avenue stood the imperious and stylized mansions of the city's old money, ersatz-Renaissance homes designed by Stanford White, huge Protestant churches, and a Byzantine synagogue. The city boasted the first modern skyscraper, designed by Louis Sullivan in the 1890s. From its productive factories to its polyglot work force to its class system and its boosterism, Buffalo was a monument to modern industrial capitalism. It is the place Kessel has come from — almost an expression of his personality itself — and the place he, at times, fears he can never escape. A cold, grimy city dominated by church and family, blinkered and cramped, forever playing second fiddle to Chicago, New York and Boston. It offers the immigrant the opportunity to find steady work in some factory or mill, but, though Kessel could not have put it into these words, it also puts a lid on his opportunities. It stands for all disappointed expections, human limitations, tawdry compromises, for the inevitable choice of the expedient over the beautiful, for an American economic system that turns all things into commodities and measures men by their bank accounts. It is the home of the industrial proletariat.

It's not unique. It could be Youngstown, Akron, Detroit. It's the place my father, and I, grew up.

The afternoon turns hot and still; during a work break Kessel strips to the waist. About two o'clock a big black de Soto comes up the road and pulls off onto the shoulder. A couple of men in suits get out of the back, and one of them talks to the Forest Service foreman, who nods deferentially. The foreman calls over to the men.

"Boys, this here's Mr. Pike from the Interior Department. He's got a guest here to see how we work, a writer, Mr. H.G. Wells from England."

Most of the men couldn't care less, but the name strikes a spark in Kessel. He looks over at the little, pot-bellied man in the dark suit. The man is sweating; he brushes his mustache.

The foreman sends Kessel up to show them how they're topping the trees. He points out to the visitors where the others with rakes and shovels are leveling the ground for the overlook. Several other men are building

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a log rail fence from the treetops. From way above, Kessel can hear their voices between the thunks of his axe. H.G. Wells. He remembers reading *The War of the Worlds* in *Amazing Stories.* He's read *The Outline of History,* too. The stories, the history, are so large, it seems impossible that the man who wrote them could be standing not thirty feet below him. He tries to concentrate on the axe, the tree.

Time for this one to go. He calls down. The men below look up. Wells takes off his hat and shields his eyes with his hand. He's balding, and looks even smaller from up here. Strange that such big ideas could come from such a small man. It's kind of disappointing. Wells leans over to Pike and says something. The treetop falls away. The pine sways like a bucking bronco, and Kessel holds on for dear life.

He comes down with the intention of saying something to Wells, telling him how much he admires him, but when he gets down the sight of the two men in suits and his awareness of his own sweaty chest make him timid. He heads down to the next tree. After another ten minutes the men get back in the car, drive away. Kessel curses himself for the opportunity lost.

THAT EVENING at the New Willard hotel, Wells dines with his old friends Clarence Darrow and Charles Russell. Darrow and Russell are in Washington to testify before a congressional committee on a report they have just submitted to the administration concerning the monopolistic effects of the National Recovery Act. The right wing is trying to eviscerate Roosevelt's program for large scale industrial management, and the Darrow Report is playing right into their hands. Wells tries, with little success, to convince Darrow of the shortsightedness of his position.

"Roosevelt is willing to sacrifice the small man to the huge corporations," Darrow insists, his eyes bright.

"The small man? Your small man is a romantic fantasy," Wells says. "It's not the New Deal that's doing him in — it's the process of industrial progress. It's the twentieth century. You can't legislate yourself back into 1870."

"What about the individual?" Russell asks.

Wells snorts. "Walk out into the streets. The individual is out on the streetcorner selling apples. The only thing that's going to save him is

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some co-ordinated effort, by intelligent, selfless men. Not your free market."

Darrow puffs on his cigar, exhales, smiles. "Don't get exasperated, H.G. We're not working for Standard Oil. But if I have to choose between the bureaucrat and the man pumping gas at the filling station, I'll take the pump jockey."

Wells sees he's got no chance against the American mythology of the common man. "Your pump jockey works for Standard Oil. And the last I checked, the free market hasn't expended much energy looking out for his interests."

"Have some more wine," Russell says.

Russell refills their glasses with the excellent bordeaux. It's been a first rate meal. Wells finds the debate stimulating even when he can't prevail; at one time that would have been enough, but as the years go on the need to prevail grows stronger in him. The times are out of joint, and when he looks around he sees desperation growing. A new world order is necessary — it's so clear that even a fool ought to see it — but if he can't even convince radicals like Darrow, what hope is there of gaining the acquiescence of the shareholders in the utility trusts?

The answer is that the changes will have to be made over their objections. As Roosevelt seems prepared to do. Wells's dinner with the President has heartened him in a way that this debate cannot negate.

Wells brings up an item he read in the Washington *Post*. A lecturer for the communist party — a young Negro — was barred from speaking at the University of Virginia. Wells's question is, as the man barred because he was a communist or because he was Negro?

"Either condition," Darrow says sardonically, "is fatal in Virginia."

"But students point out the University has allowed communists to speak on campus before, and has allowed Negroes to perform music there."

"They can perform, but they can't speak," Russell says. "This isn't unusual. Go down to the Paradise Ballroom, not a mile from here. There's a Negro orchestra playing there, but no Negroes are allowed inside to listen."

"You should go to hear them anyway," Darrow says. "It's Duke Ellington. Have you heard of him?"

"I don't get on with the titled nobility," Wells quips.

"Oh, this Ellington's a noble fellow, all right, but I don't think you'll find him in the peerage," Russell says.

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"He plays jazz, doesn't he?"

"Not like any jazz you've heard," Darrow says. "It's something totally new. You should find a place for it in one of your utopias."

All three of them are for helping the colored peoples. Darrow has defended Negroes accused of capital crimes. Wells, on his first visit to America almost thirty years ago, met with Booker T. Washington and came away impressed, although he still considers the peaceable coexistence of the white and colored races problematical.

"What are you working on now, Wells?" Russell asks. "What new improbability are you preparing to assault us with? Racial equality? Sexual liberation?"

"I'm writing a screen treatment based on *The Shape of Things to Come*," Wells says. He tells them about his screenplay, sketching out for them the future he has in his mind. An apocalyptic war, a war of unsurpassed brutality that will begin, in his film, in 1939. In this war, the creations of science will be put to the service of destruction in ways that will make the horrors of the Great War pale in comparison. Whole populations will be exterminated. But then, out of the ruins will arise the new world. The orgy of violence will purge the human race of the last vestiges of tribal thinking. Then will come the organization of the directionless and weak by the intelligent and purposeful. The new man. Cleaner, stronger, more rational. Wells can see it. He talks on, supplely, surely, late into the night. His mind is fertile with invention, still. He can see that Darrow and Russell, despite their Yankee individualism, are caught up by his vision. The future may be threatened, but it is not entirely closed.

Friday night, back in the barracks at Fort Hunt, Kessel lies on his bunk reading the latest *Astounding Stories*. He's halfway through the tale of a scientist who invents an evolution chamber that progresses him through 50,000 years of evolution in an hour, turning him into a big-brained telepathic monster. The evolved scientist is totally without emotions and wants to control the world. But his body's atrophied. Will the hero, a young engineer, be able to stop him?

At a plank table in the aisle a bunch of men are playing poker for cigarettes. They're talking about women and dogs. Cole throws in his hand and comes over to sit on the next bunk. "Still reading that stuff, Jack?"

"Don't knock it until you've tried it."

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"Are you coming into D.C. with us tomorrow? Sgt. Sauter says we can catch a ride in on one of the trucks."

Kessel thinks about it. Cole probably wants to borrow some money. Two days after he gets his monthly pay he's broke. He's always looking for a good time. Kessel spends his leave more quietly; he usually walks into Alexandria — about six miles — and sees a movie or just walks around town. Still, he would like to see more of Washington. "Okay."

Cole looks at the sketchbook poking out from beneath Kessel's pillow. "Any more hot pictures?"

Immediately Kessel regrets trusting Cole. Yet there's not much he can say — the book is full of pictures of movie stars he's drawn. "I'm learning to draw. And at least I don't waste my time like the rest of you guys."

Cole looks serious. "You know, you're not any better than the rest of us," he says, not angrily. "You're just another polack. Don't get so high-and-mighty."

"Just because I want to improve myself doesn't mean I'm high-and-mighty."

"Hey, Cole, are you in or out?" Turkel yells from the table.

"Dream on, Jack," Cole says, and returns to the game.

Kessel tries to go back to the story, but he isn't interested anymore. He can figure out that the hero is going to defeat the hyper-evolved scientist in the end. He folds his arms behind his head and stares at the knots in the rafters.

It's true, Kessel does spend a lot of time dreaming. But he has things he wants to do, and he's not going to waste his life drinking and whoring like the rest of them.

Kessel's always been different. Quieter, smarter. He was always going to do something better than the rest of them; he's well spoken, he likes to read. Even though he didn't finish high school he reads everything: *Amazing, Astounding, Wonder Stories.* He believes in the future. He doesn't want to end up trapped in some factory his whole life.

Kessel's parents immigrated from Poland in 1911. Their name was Kisiel, but his got Germanized in Catholic school. For ten years the family moved from one to another middle-sized industrial towns, as Joe Kisiel bounced from job to job. Springfield. Utica. Syracuse. Rochester. Kessel remembers them loading up a wagon in the middle of night with all their belongings in order to jump the rent on the run-down house in Syracuse.

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He remembers pulling a cart down to the Utica Club brewery, a nickel in his hand, to buy his father a keg of beer. He remembers them finally settling in the First Ward of Buffalo. The First Ward, at the foot of the Erie Canal, was an Irish neighborhood as far back as anybody could remember, and the Kisiels were the only Poles there. That's where he developed his chameleon ability to fit in, despite the fact he wanted nothing more than to get out. But he had to protect his mother, sister and little brothers from their father's drunken rages. When Joe Kisiel died in 1924 it was a relief, despite the fact that his son ended up supporting the family.

For ten years Kessel has strained against the tug of that responsibility. He's sought the free and easy feeling of the road, of places different from where he grew up, romantic places where the sun shines and he can make something entirely American of himself.

Despite his ambitions, he's never accomplished much. He's been essentially a drifter, moving from job to job. Starting as a pinsetter in a bowling alley, he moved on to a flour mill. He would have stayed in the mill only he developed an allergy to the flour dust, so he became an electrician. He would have stayed an electrician except he had a fight with a boss and got blacklisted. He left Buffalo because of his father; he kept coming back because of his mother. When the Depression hit he tried to get a job in Detroit at the auto factories, but that was plain stupid in the face of the universal collapse, and he ended up working up in the peninsula as a farm hand, then as a logger. It was seasonal work, and when the season was over he was out of a job. In the winter of 1933, rather than freeze his ass off in northern Michigan, he joined the CCC. Now he sends twenty-five of his thirty dollars a month back to his mother and sister back in Buffalo. And imagines the future.

When he thinks about it, there are two futures. The first one is the one from the magazines and books. Bright, slick, easy. We, looking back on it, can see it to be the fifteen-cent utopianism of Hugo Gernsback's *Popular Electrics*, that flourished in the midst of the Depression. A degradation of the marvelous inventions that made Wells his early reputation, minus the social theorizing that drove Wells's technological speculations. The common man's boosterism. There's money to be made telling people like Jack Kessel about the wonderful world of the future.

The second future is Kessel's own. That one's a lot harder to see. It contains work. A good job, doing something he likes, using his skills. Not

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working for another man, but making something that would be useful for others. Building something for the future. And a woman, a gentle woman, for his wife. Not some cheap dancehall queen.

So when Kessel saw H.G. Wells in person, that meant something to him. He's had his doubts. He's 29 years old, not a kid anymore. If he's ever going to get anywhere, it's going to have to start happening soon. He has the feeling that something significant is going to happen to him. Wells is a man who sees the future. He moves in that bright world where things make sense. He represents something that Kessel wants.

But the last thing Kessel wants is to end up back in Buffalo.

He pulls the sketchbook, the sketchbook he was to show me twenty years later, from under his pillow. He turns past drawings of movie stars: Jean Harlow, Mae West, Carole Lombard — the beautiful, unreachable faces of his longing — and of natural scenes: rivers, forests, birds — to a blank page. The page is as empty as the future, waiting for him to write upon it. He lets his imagination soar. He envisions an eagle, gliding high above the mountains of the west that he has never seen, but that he knows he will visit some day. The eagle is America; it is his own dreams. He begins to draw.

Kessel did not know that Wells's life has not worked out as well as he planned. At that moment Wells is pining after the Russian emigre Moura Budberg, once Maxim Gorky's secretary, with whom Wells has been carrying on an off-and-on affair since 1920. His wife of thirty years, Amy Catherine "Jane" Wells, died in 1927. Since that time Wells has been adrift, alternating spells of furious pamphleteering with listless periods of suicidal depression. Meanwhile, all London is gossiping about the recent attack published in *Time and Tide* by his vengeful ex-lover Odette Keun. Have his mistakes followed him across the Atlantic to undermine his purpose? Does Darrow think him a jumped-up cockney? A moment of doubt overwhelms him. In the end, the future depends as much on the open mindedness of men like Darrow as it does on a reorganization of society. What good is a guild of samurai if no one arises to take the job?

Wells doesn't like the trend of these thoughts. If human nature lets him down, then his whole life has been a waste.

But he's seen the president. He's seen those workers on the road. Those men climbing the trees risk their lives without complaining, for minimal

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He remembers writing *The Time Machine*, he and Jane living in rented rooms in Sevenoaks.

pay. It's easy to think of them as stupid or desperate or simply young, but it's also possible to give them credit for dedication to their work. They don't seem to be ridden by the desire to grub and clutch that capitalism rewards; if you look at it properly that may be the explanation for their ending up wards of the state. And is Wells any better? If he hadn't got an education he would have ended up a miserable draper's assistant.

Wells is due to leave for New York Sunday. Saturday night finds him sitting in his room, trying to write, after a solitary dinner in the New Willard. Another bottle of wine, or his age, has stirred something in Wells, and despite his rationalizations he finds himself near despair. Moura has rejected him. He needs the soft, supportive embrace of a lover, but instead he has this stuffy hotel room in a heat wave.

He remembers writing *The Time Machine*, he and Jane living in rented rooms in Sevenoaks with her ailing mother, worried about money, about whether the landlady would put them out. In the drawer of the dresser was a writ from the court that refused to grant him a divorce from his wife Isabel. He remembers a warm night, late in August — much like this one — sitting up late after Jane and her mother went to bed, writing at the round table before the open window, under the light of a paraffin lamp. One part of his mind was caught up in the rush of creation, burning, following the Time Traveller back to the sphinx, pursued by the Morlocks, only to discover that his machine is gone and he is trapped without escape from his desperate circumstances. At the same moment he could hear the landlady, out in the garden, fully aware that he could hear her, complaining to the neighbor about his and Jane's scandalous habits. On the one side, the petty conventions of a crabbed world; on the other, in his mind — the future, their peril and hope. Moths fluttering through the window beat themselves against the lampshade and fell onto the manuscript; he brushed them away unconsciously and continued, furiously, in a white heat. The time traveler, battered and hungry, returning from the future with a warning, and a flower.

He opens the hotel windows all the way but the curtains aren't stirred by a breath of air. Below, in the street, he hears the sound of traffic, and

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music. He decides to send a telegram to Moura, but after several false starts he finds he has nothing to say. Why has she refused to marry him? Maybe he is finally too old, and the magnetism of sex or power or intellect that has drawn women to him for forty years has finally all been squandered. The prospect of spending the last years remaining to him alone fills him with dread.

He turns on the radio, gets successive band shows: Morton Downey. Fats Waller. Jazz. Paging through the newspaper, he comes across an advertisement for the Ellington orchestra Darrow mentioned; it's at the ballroom just down the block. But the thought of a smoky room doesn't appeal to him. He considers the cinema. He has never been much for the "movies." Though he thinks them an unrivaled opportunity to educate, that promise has never been properly seized — something he hopes to do in *Things to Come*. The newspaper reveals an uninspiring selection: "20 Million Sweethearts," a musical at the Earle, "The Black Cat," with Boris Karloff and Bela Lugosi at the Rialto, and "Tarzan and His Mate" at the Palace. To these Americans he is the equivalent of this hack, Edgar Rice Burroughs. The books I read as a child, that fired my father's imagination and my own, Wells considers his frivolous apprentice work. His serious work is discounted. His ideas mean nothing.

Wells decides to try the Tarzan movie. He dresses for the sultry weather — Washington in May is like high summer in London — and goes down to the lobby. He checks his street guide and takes the streetcar to the Palace Theater, where he buys an orchestra seat, for twenty-five cents, to see "Tarzan and His Mate."

It is a perfectly wretched movie, comprised wholly of romantic fantasy, melodrama and sexual innuendo. The dramatic leads perform with wooden idiocy surpassed only by the idiocy of the screenplay. Wells is attracted by the undeniable charms of the young heroine, Maureen O'Sullivan, but the film is devoid of intellectual content. Thinking of the audience at which such a farrago must be aimed depresses him. This is art as fodder. Yet the theater is filled, and the people are held in rapt attention. This only depresses Wells more. If these citizens are the future of America, then the future of America is dim.

An hour into the film the antics of an anthropomorphized chimpanzee, a scene of transcendent stupidity which nevertheless sends the audience into gales of laughter, drives Wells from the theater. It is still mid-evening.

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He wanders down the avenue of theaters, restaurants and clubs. On the sidewalk are beggars, ignored by the passersby. In an alley behind a hotel Wells spots a woman and child picking through the ashcans beside the restaurant kitchen.

Unexpectedly, he comes upon the marquee announcing "Duke Ellington and his Orchestra." From within the open doors of the ballroom wafts the sound of jazz. Impulsively, Wells buys a ticket and goes in.

KESSEL AND his cronies have spent the day walking around the mall, which the WPA is re-landscaping. They've seen the Lincoln Memorial, the Capitol, the Washington Monument, the Smithsonian, the White House. Kessell has his picture taken in front of a statue of a soldier — a photo I have sitting on my desk. I've studied it many times. He looks forthrightly into the camera, faintly smiling. His face is confident, unlined.

When night comes they hit the bars. Prohibition was lifted only last year and the novelty has not yet worn off. The younger men get plastered, but Kessel finds himself uninterested in getting drunk. A couple of them set their minds on women and head for the Gayety Burlesque; Cole, Kessel and Turkel end up in the Paradise Ballroom listening to Duke Ellington.

They have a couple of drinks, ask some girls to dance. Kessel dances with a short girl with a southern accent who refuses to look him in the eyes. After thanking her he returns to the others at the bar. He sips his beer. "Not so lucky, Jack?" Cole says.

"She doesn't like a tall man," Turkel says.

Kessel wonders why Turkel came along. Turkel is always complaining about "niggers," and his only comment on the Ellington band so far has been to complain about how a bunch of jigs can make a living playing jungle music while white men sleep in barracks and eat grits three times a day. Kessel's got nothing against the colored, and he likes the music, though it's not exactly the kind of jazz he's used to. It doesn't sound much like dixieland. It's darker, bigger, more dangerous. Ellington, resplendent in tie and tails, looks like he's enjoying himself up there at his piano, knocking out minimal solos while the orchestra plays cool and low.

Turning from them to look across the tables, Kessel sees a little man sitting alone beside the dance floor, watching the young couples sway to the music. To his astonishment he recognizes Wells. He's been given

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another chance. Hesitating only a moment, Kessel abandons his friends, goes over to the table and introduces himself.

"Excuse me, Mr. Wells. You might not remember me, but I was one of the men you saw yesterday in Virginia working along the road. The CCC?"

Wells looks up at a gangling young man wearing a khaki uniform, his olive tie neatly knotted and tucked between the second and third buttons of his shirt. His hair is slicked down, parted in the middle. Wells doesn't remember anything of him. "Yes?"

"I — I been reading your stories and books a lot of years. I admire your work."

Something in the man's earnestness affects Wells. "Please sit down," he says.

Kessel takes a seat. "Thank you." He pronounces "th" as "t" so that "thank" comes out "tank." He sits tentatively, as if the chair is mortgaged, and seems at a loss for words.

"What's your name?"

"John Kessel. My friends call me Jack."

The orchestra finishes a song and the dancers stop in their places, applauding. Up on the bandstand, Ellington leans into the microphone. "Mood Indigo," he says, and instantly they swing into it: the clarinet moans in low register, in unison with the muted trumpet and trombone, paced by the steady rhythm guitar, the brushed drums. The song's melancholy suits Wells's mood.

"Are you from Virginia?"

"My family lives in Buffalo. That's in New York."

"Ah — yes. Many years ago I visited Niagara Falls, and took the train through Buffalo." Wells remembers riding along a lakefront of factories spewing waste water into the lake, past heaps of coal, clouds of orange and black smoke from blast furnaces. In front of dingy rowhouses, ragged hedges struggled through the smoky air. The landscape of laissez faire. "I imagine the Depression has hit Buffalo severely."

"Yes sir."

"What work did you do there?"

Kessel feels nervous, but he opens up a little. "A lot of things. I used to be an electrician until I got blacklisted."

"Blacklisted?"

"I was working on this job where the super told me to set the wiring

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wrong. I argued with him but he just told me to do it his way. So I waited until he went away, then I sneaked into the construction shack and checked the blueprints. He didn't think I could read blueprints, but I could. I found out I was right and he was wrong. So I went back and did it right. The next day when he found out, he fired me. Then the so-and-so went and got me blacklisted."

Though he doesn't know how much credence to put in this story, Wells's sympathies are aroused. It's the kind of thing that must happen all the time. He recognizes in Kessel the immigrant stock that, when Wells visited the U.S. in 1906, made him skeptical about the future of America. He'd theorized that these Italians and Slavs, coming from lands with no democratic tradition, unable to speak English, would degrade the already corrupt political process. They could not be made into good citizens; they would not work well when they could work poorly, and given the way the economic deal was stacked against them would seldom rise high enough to do better.

But Kessel is clean, well-spoken despite his accent, and deferential. Wells realizes that this is one of the men who was topping trees along the river road.

Meanwhile, Kessel detects a sadness in Wells's manner. He had not imagined that Wells might be sad, and he feels sympathy for him. It occurs to him, to his own astonishment, that he might be able to make *Wells* feel better. "So — what do you think of our country?" he asks.

"Good things seem to be happening here. I'm impressed with your President Roosevelt."

"Roosevelt's the best friend the working man ever had." Kessel pronounces the name "Roozvelt." "He's a man that —" he struggles for the words, "—that's not for the past. He's for the future."

It begins to dawn on Wells that Kessel is not an example of a class, or a sociological study, but a man like himself with an intellect, opinions, dreams. He thinks of his own youth, struggling to rise in a classbound society. He leans forward across the table. "You believe in the future? You think things can be different?"

"I think they have to be, Mr. Wells."

Wells sits back. "Good. So do I."

Kessel is stunned by this intimacy. It is more than he had hoped for, yet it leaves him with little to say. He wants to tell Wells about his

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dreams, and at the same time ask him a thousand questions. He wants to tell Wells everything he has seen in the world, and to hear Wells tell him the same. He casts about for something to say.

"I always liked your writing. I like to read scientifiction."

"Scientifiction?"

Kessel shifts his long legs. "You know — stories about the future. Monsters from outer space. The Martians. *The Time Machine.* You're the best scientifiction writer I ever read, next to Edgar Rice Burroughs." Kessel pronounces "Edgar," "Eedgar."

"Edgar Rice Burroughs?"

"Yes."

"You *like* Burroughs?"

Kessel hears the disapproval in Wells's voice. "Well — maybe not as much as, as *The Time Machine,*" he stutters. "Burroughs never wrote about monsters as good as your Morlocks."

Wells is nonplussed. "Monsters."

"Yes." Kessel feels something's going wrong, but he sees no way out. "But he does put more romance in his stories. That princess — Deja Thoris?"

All Wells can think of is Tarzan in his loincloth on the movie screen, and the moronic audience. After a lifetime of struggling, a hundred books written to change the world, in the service of men like this, is this all his work has come to? To be compared to the writer of pulp trash? To "Eedgar Rice Burroughs?" He laughs aloud.

At Wells's laugh, Kessel stops. He knows he's done something wrong, but he doesn't know what.

Wells's weariness has dropped down onto his shoulders again like an iron cloak. "Young man — go away," he says. "You don't know what you're saying. Go back to Buffalo."

Kessel's face burns. He stumbles from the table. The room is full of noise and laughter. He's run up against the wall again. He's just an ignorant polack after all; it's his stupid accent, his clothes. He should have talked about something else — *The Outline of History,* politics. But what made him think he could talk like an equal to a man like Wells in the first place? Wells lives in a different world. The future is for men like him. Kessel feels himself the prey of fantasies. It's a bitter joke.

He clutches the bar, orders another beer. His reflection in the mirror

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behind the ranked bottles is small and ugly.

"Whatsa matter, Jack?" Turkel asks him. "Didn't he want to dance neither?"

And that's the story, essentially, that never happened.

Not long after this, Kessel did go back to Buffalo. During the Second World War he worked as a crane operator in the 40-inch rolling mill of Bethlehem Steel. He met his wife, Angela Giorlandino, during the war, and they married in June 1945. After the war he quit the plant and became a carpenter. Their first child, a girl, died in infancy. Their second, a boy, was born in 1950. At that time Kessel began building the house that, like so many things in his life, he was never to entirely complete. He worked hard, had two more children. There were good years and bad ones. He held a lot of jobs. The recession of 1958 just about flattened him; our family had to go on welfare. Things got better, but they never got good. After the 1950s, the economy of Buffalo, like that of all U.S. industrial cities caught in the transition to a post-industrial age, declined steadily. Kessel never did work for himself, and as an old man was no more prosperous than he had been as a young one.

In the years preceding his death in 1945 Wells was to go on to further disillusionment. His efforts to create a sane world met with increasing frustration. He became bitter, enraged. Moura Budberg never agreed to marry him, and he lived alone. The war came, and it was, in some ways, even worse than he had predicted. He continued to propagandize for the socialist world state throughout, but with increasing irrelevance. The new leftists like Orwell considered him a dinosaur, fatally out of touch with the realities of world politics, a simpleminded technocrat with no understanding of the darkness of the human heart. Wells's last book, *Mind at the End of Its Tether*, proposed that the human race faced an evolutionary crisis that would lead to its extinction unless humanity leapt to a higher state of consciousness; a leap about which Wells speculated with little hope or conviction.

Sitting there in the Washington ballroom in 1934, Wells might well have understood that for all his thinking and preaching about the future, the future had irrevocably passed him by.

But the story isn't quite over yet. Back in the Washington ballroom

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Wells sits humiliated, a little guilty for sending Kessel away so harshly. Kessel, his back to the dance floor, stares humiliated into his glass of beer. Gradually, both of them are pulled back from dark thoughts of their own inadequacies by the sound of Ellington's orchestra.

Ellington stands in front of the big grand piano, behind him the band: three saxes, two clarinets, two trumpets, trombones, a drummer, guitarist, bass. "Creole Love Call," Ellington whispers into the microphone, then sits again at the piano. He waves his hand once, twice, and the clarinets slide into a low, wavering theme. The trumpet, muted, echoes it. The bass player and guitarist strum ahead at a deliberate pace, rhythmic, erotic, bluesey. Kessel and Wells, separate across the room, each unaware of the other, are alike drawn in. The trumpet growls eight bars of raucous solo. The clarinet follows, wailing. The music is full of pain and longing — but pain controlled, ordered, mastered. Longing unfulfilled, but not overpowering.

As I write this, it plays on my stereo. If anyone has a right to bitterness at thwarted dreams, a black man in 1934 had that right. That such men can, in such conditions, make this music opens a world of possibilities.

Through the music speaks a truth about art that Wells does not understand, but that I hope to: that art doesn't have to deliver a message in order to say something important. That art isn't always a means to an end but sometimes an end in itself. That art may not be able to change the world, but it can still change the moment.

Through the music speaks a truth about life that Kessel, sixteen years before my birth, doesn't understand, but that I hope to: that life constrained is not life wasted. That despite unfulfilled dreams, peace is possible.

Listening, Wells feels that peace steal over his soul. Kessel feels it too.

And so they wait, poised, calm, before they move on into their respective futures, into our own present. Into the world of limitation and loss. Into Buffalo.

for my father

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Kedrigern makes a happy return to these pages in a story in which the irascible wizard is forced to leave Thunder Mountain to deal with the King of the Valley of Misgivings, who has lost his wits.

Fair-Weather Fiend

By John Morressy

MIDNIGHT HAD COME and passed. Princess had nodded off to sleep over her spelling book. Spot was working at something in the cellar, from which thumps and clinking sounds arose at intervals, interspersed with clatters and clanks. Kedrigern was struggling against weariness as he reached the last pages of a spectacularly gory chronicle. All without the house, and all within — save Spot's muted industry and Kedrigern's turned pages and smothered yawns — was silent.

Suddenly, without preamble of any kind, three knocks sounded at the door, and Kedrigern was alert at once. Princess stirred and sighed, but did not wake. The knocking had been no preemptory battering, but a soft, almost surreptitious, series of taps. Kedrigern waited a moment, listening, and it came again, no louder than before, but this time doubled: three quick taps, a pause, and then three more.

Spot's huge head appeared at knee level in the doorway. "Yah?" it inquired softly.

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"Good troll, Spot," said the wizard, rising. "I'll get the door. You stay close, just in case."

"Yah, yah!" the house-troll whispered.

There had been no heavy footsteps or flapping of wings; the caller was most likely an ordinary mortal, then. But neither had there been hoofbeats — and what ordinary mortal would walk up Silent Thunder Mountain in the dead of night? And who, having the courage and determination to find his way to a wizard's abode, would tap so timidly at the door? A thief or assassin would not knock at all; a lost traveler would pound and shout in mortal terror; a friend would rap with assurance. As he made his silent way from the coziness of the hearthside, Kedrigern pondered the mystery, but could not puzzle out a solution. The only thing to do was to answer the door and ascertain the visitor's identity by ocular evidence. He worked a short-term security spell on himself, the cottage, and all within. That, plus Spot's formidable strength, he deemed sufficient protection.

Directing the house-troll to a handy place of concealment, Kedrigern drew the latch and eased the door open. He saw no one. In his most authoritative voice, he demanded, "Who knocks? Answer, or I close the door!"

"Master Kedrigern?" whispered a voice near at hand.

"I am Kedrigern. Who speaks?"

"A messenger from Tarpash, King of the Valley of Misgivings. I come on a matter of utmost urgency," said the voice.

"Where are you?" Kedrigern asked. The night was overcast. He could see nothing more than the vague outline of the treetops, dark against a lesser darkness.

"Here," whispered the messenger.

"Are you invisible?"

"I am veiled, masked, and cloaked. My horse is shod in felt. Mine is a mission of the utmost secrecy as well as the utmost urgency."

Kedrigern raised his medallion to his eye and peered through the Aperture of True Vision in the direction of the voice. He saw a human form, lithe but sturdy, clad head to foot in black. He breathed a sigh of relief. There was no magic in any of this, nothing out of the ordinary, only typical royal self-importance. That was kings for you: a splinter in the royal thumb, and everyone for leagues around was expected to drop what they were doing and weep over His Majesty's injured digit. With a gesture, Kedrigern said, "Come inside."

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The figure did not stir. "You really are a wizard, aren't you? I can deal only with the wizard Kedrigern."

"I told you who I am. What do you want for proof — shall I turn you into a toad?"

"Oh, no, no! That will not be necessary. I believe you. It's just that . . . well, you don't look like a wizard," said the messenger.

Kedrigern sighed. He heard this from everyone, including Princess, and had grown accustomed to it without growing to like it. He had no long white beard; he dressed in ordinary homespun tunic and breeches and comfortable, well-worn boots, and did not look to be anywhere near his 170th year. He did not look young, except when he laughed; nor did he look old, except when he was deep in memory and a certain look came into his eyes. He looked like a merchant, a scholar, a great man's steward, perhaps a goldsmith or a carver of delicate designs in ivory. He looked like anything but a wizard, and was content with the situation. It made his life simpler.

"I am Kedrigern the wizard," he said slowly and distinctly. "Take my word for it, or leave my door."

"I believe you, Master Kedrigern! Truly, I do!"

With an impatient, grumbling grunt, Kedrigern stepped inside and dismissed Spot with a silent gesture. The troll bounded off to the cellar, to resume its exertions.

"Well, come in," said the wizard.

Once inside, the messenger doffed his cloak and broad-brimmed hat. He retained the mask that covered his face. A veil depended from the mask, but did not conceal the reddish gold beard of the wearer. He was a tall man, well formed, and he spoke with assurance in a mild, cultured voice.

"I will be brief," Master Kedrigern: the king is sore afflicted. Only a wizard can help him."

"What is it? A curse? A spell? Did he open something he shouldn't have opened? Provoke a witch? Insult a fairy?"

"The details are obscure, and even the little I know, I cannot reveal."

"Then how do you know that King Tarpash needs the services of a wizard and not a physician?" snapped Kedrigern irritably.

"The Royal Physician was summoned immediately. He examined His Majesty and declared that only a wizard or an alchemist could—"

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"An alchemist?" Kedrigern cried. "What is he trying to do to the poor man? An alchemist couldn't help a sick rat!"

"We are desperate, Master Kedrigern."

"You must be, if you can consider calling in an alchemist. Tarpash always had a good head on his shoulders. He would never have —"

A sob burst from the messenger, silencing Kedrigern. When the man had composed himself, he said in a subdued, but no less urgent, voice, "the king must be helped at once. If he is not, the marriage cannot take place!"

"What marriage? Tarpash is happily married — has been for thirty years."

"His son's marriage. Prince Middry is to marry Belserena of the Dappled Dales, the sweetest, loveliest, most adorable woman in all the world. Her hair is spun gold, her eyes twin pools of violet, her lips a rosebud, her form divine. Flowers of indescribable fragrance spring up where her dainty foot caresses the ground — oh, happy ground! — and her very voice perfumes the air," the messenger rhapsodized. He paused to draw breath so that he might continue his litany of adoration, but Kedrigern raised a hand to silence him.

"It's all right, Prince Middry. You can take off the mask and tell me the whole story," he said.

The messenger stood thunderstruck for a moment, then tore away mask and veil to reveal a reasonably handsome, rather pallid face and red-rimmed eyes. "How did you know? My disguise was impenetrable!"

Kedrigern smiled inscrutably. "I am a wizard, my son. I know all sorts of things."

"Then you must help my father! The wedding is set for nine days hence!"

"Come in by the fire, Prince Middry. Sit down, put your feet up, and tell me everything."

By this time, Princess had been awakened by the sound of voices. She welcomed the visitor, and listened with profound attention to his account. It was depressingly short. The King of the Valley of Misgivings had lost his wits. No one knew how, or why, or precisely when or where the tragedy had occurred, and no one had the faintest idea of a remedy. The approaching wedding added urgency to the gravity of the situation. It would be socially unacceptable, and politically disastrous, to have the father of the groom insist on a game of pat-a-cake, or pull off his boots

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and start playing with his toes, in the middle of the ceremony; and yet to postpone the wedding, or call it off entirely, would create a diplomatic crisis, as well as desolate the betrothed couple.

Much as he abominated travel, Kedrigern recognized his obligations as a wizard and an old acquaintance of the royal family. Princess was pleased by the prospects of a visit to a royal court, albeit a distraught one. She spoke cheerfully of a nice little trip, as Kedrigern had known she would. "A nice little trip," he reflected unhappily, was Princess's term for any journey short of a decades-long mass migration fraught with perils beyond imagining.

THIS TRIP, if not exactly nice, was at least short and free of mishap. They left Silent Thunder Mountain at first light, yawning and uncommunicative, and covered the distance in less than four days' hard riding.

Dusty, travel-sore, weary, and faint with hunger, they were conducted at once to the presence of Queen Yulda. In her youth she had been known as Yulda of the Dovelike Voice, and praised in the conventional forms for her beauty; but her youth was now a remote memory. Yulda had changed. She was now a large frowning woman with hair the color of wood ash and a jaw like a nutcracker.

Her manner suited her appearance. Without so much as a glance at her exhausted son, she speared Kedrigern with an angry question. "Who is this woman?" she demanded of him in a voice more corvine than dovelike.

Princess had concealed her wings under her cloak. Though as tired as the others, she was still spectacularly beautiful, perhaps too much so to be taken for a wizard or a wife. Her black hair gleamed; her blue eyes glowed; and at Yulda's question, her white teeth clenched.

"This is my wife. She is a woman of royal blood and my fellow adept. We work together," Kedrigern replied.

"I require your services only," said the queen.

With a low bow, Kedrigern said, "We work together, Your Majesty, or we do not work at all."

Queen Yulda glowered on them both, and cast a quick, angry scowl at her son. "You are presumptuous in your speech, wizard," she said.

"Those are my conditions, Your Majesty."

She pondered for a time, frowning mightily, then said, "Only five

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days remain before the wedding. Can you help Tarpash? Be truthful, wizard."

"I'll have to see His Majesty before I can answer that."

"You're supposed to be a great wizard — can't you work a spell, or a counterspell, or something like that? Something quick?"

"I *am* a great wizard, Your Majesty. And precisely because I am, I do nothing in haste. A great wizard never disenchants or despells until he knows what kind of enchantment or spell he's dealing with. May I see the king?" Kedrigern replied patiently.

"His Majesty is asleep, and I do not wish to have him disturbed. He played very hard today, and missed his nap," said the queen.

"Then perhaps you will provide what information you can. I must know precisely what happened."

Queen Yulda glanced surreptitiously around the chamber, then beckoned Kedrigern closer. Lowering her voice, she said, "We don't know. His Majesty was fine at breakfast. By midday he had lost his wits."

"Where did His Majesty spend the morning?" Kedrigern asked.

"The king was in the countinghouse."

"Counting out his money?"

"Certainly not. The Treasurer's men do that. The king goes to the countinghouse to relax."

"Was anyone with him?"

"He never takes anyone with him. He likes his privacy. He stayed in the countinghouse for a time, then went out to sit under his favorite tree. It was a beautiful sunny day. Not a cloud in the sky."

"I see," Kedrigern murmured, stroking his chin in a thoughtful gesture. In truth, he saw nothing. A thick mist of fatigue lay over his mind. His stomach felt like an abyss, his bones ached, and he was ready to collapse from exhaustion; but he did his best to preserve a wizardly facade. "Where were you and the prince?" he asked.

"I was in the parlor when I received word of the tragedy. I had just finished a light repast," said the queen.

"Bread and honey, I presume," Kedrigern said confidently.

"Currant cake and sweet wine," Yulda corrected him, with an expression of genteel disgust. "Bread and honey is not a suitable snack for one of royal blood. It is very common."

Princess, who enjoyed the occasional bit of bread and honey, gave the

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queen a black glance, but said nothing, being too bone-weary to dispute over any matter less than life-threatening. She merely yawned.

"And where were you, Prince Middry?"

"I spent the morning with my tailors. It was such a lovely morning, too. Prefect for riding. But they insisted on a fitting," said the prince, pouting.

"And how did you learn of . . . the incident?"

"Mother sent the messenger directly to me."

"Yes, of course," said the wizard, nodding. He turned to the queen. "Do you recall the messenger's exact words?"

"No. He babbled. When I finally got him to pull himself together, he told me that the king was sitting under the oak tree near the counting-house, eating a worm. I perceived at once that something was amiss. When I arrived at the scene, Tarpash had pulled a boot over his head and was trying to put his gloves on his feet. I was greatly distressed."

Middry, after a wide, audible yawn, said, "Mother, one must not overtax oneself. Let's continue this in the morning."

"I am not overtaxed. Every minute is precious."

"But, Mother, *I* am overtaxed. I've been traveling hard for days. I've been in the saddle since dawn."

"Think of the kingdom, boy! Think of the wedding. Think of your father. Pull yourself together," said Yulda severely.

"Your Majesty, we are all overtaxed. Disenchantments always work best when one is fully rested and one's mind is keen. Fatigue can be hazardous to the enchantee," said Kedrigern. He emphasized his words with a yawn.

"Delay can be hazardous to the kingdom, wizard," Queen Yulda growled.

"We still have five days, Your Majesty."

"If you wait until morning, we will have only *four* days."

"Trust me, Your Majesty," Kedrigern said. After a great yawn, which was immediately reprised by Princess and Prince Middry, he went on, "I will confer with the Royal Physician first thing in the morning, and then examine His Majesty — if he is awake."

Yulda glowered at all three of them in turn. At last, grudgingly, she said, "Very well. You are dismissed. I will have you roused at the first crowing of the cock, wizard — you and your fellow adept."

Princess did not speak until they were alone in their chamber, to

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which she strode with lips compressed and eyes narrowed. When the door was closed, she rounded on Kedrigern, saying, "That woman deserves a curse on her own head, and I'm ready to provide it! I never met such a surly virago in my life! If she thinks I'll lift a finger to help—"

"My dear, Yulda's upset. We're not seeing her best side," Kedrigern said in his most soothing voice. He opened his arms to embrace and comfort Princess, but she would have none of it. Taking wing, she flew to the mantelpiece, where she perched with cold eye and folded arms. "Best side? Hah!' she said with a contemptuous toss of her head.

"Think of the strain she's under. Her husband's wits gone, her son's happiness in jeopardy, her kingdom—"

"A lot she cares about Middry's happiness. Did you see the way she treated him?"

"Yes, but—"

"No wonder he's so fearful of the wedding's being called off. He can't wait to escape from this place and that monstrous woman!"

"I'm sure Middry really loves Belserena. He spoke glowingly of her at every opportunity."

"Talk. Nothing but talk. He only wants to get away. It's hard to blame him, actually," said Princess. She flew down and stood by the open window.

"Then we must do all we can to help King Tarpash. To help him is to help Middry."

Princess paced up and down before the window, fluttering a short distance every now and then as was her habit when deep in thought. She stopped abruptly and said, "What about the poor girl? It's all very well to help Middry, but Belserena will wind up with that gimlet-eyed fishwife for a mother-in-law. And no great prize for a husband, either."

"Presumably the young lady knows what she's getting herself into, my dear. She may be in love. Perhaps she's doing it for her kingdom. I don't think we ought to meddle in private affairs."

Princess was unconvinced, but she and Kedrigern were by this time too weary to dispute further. A servant brought them a tray of bread, cheese, and fruit, which they consumed with great appetite before turning in, to fall asleep at once.

A pounding at the door awoke them just as the first light appeared in the eastern sky. A cock crowed near by.

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"All right, all right! We're getting up! We're up!" Kedrigern groaned. "Stop hammering!"

"The Royal Physician attends in his chamber," a voice outside the door announced. "I will conduct you to him."

Peevish and puffy-eyed, Kedrigern and Princess dressed in haste and followed the servant up several broad staircases, down three long corridors, and along a gloomy passageway until, having climbed one final narrow, winding staircase, they came to a tower room. A portly, bald man with a bushy, grizzled beard stood in the doorway, yawning.

"The wizard Kedrigern," the servant announced.

Princess gave a flutter of her wings, hovered before the servant at eye level, and said sternly, "Announce us properly, young man. It's the wizards Kedrigern and Princess, and don't you forget it."

"My lady flies!" the servant whispered, hoarse with astonishment.

"That's not all she does," said Princess, gliding to Kedrigern's side. "Well, go ahead. Announce."

"The wizards Kedrigern and Princess," said the servant, his voice cracking slightly on her name. Dismissed, he sped off.

"Very nice. So you're the wizards. Mind if I have a look at those wings?" said the physician.

"I am not here to be examined," Princess said with dignity.

"Just a quick look, my lady. I want to see how they're attached."

"They are not *attached;* they are *mine.* It was all done by magic."

"Look, about the king . . . ," Kedrigern said.

"Can't help you there, I'm afraid," said the physician, not taking his eyes off Princess. "Yours, you say? Growing right out of your back?"

"We have to learn what's happened to King Tarpash!" Kedrigern cried in exasperation.

"Well, don't look at me. I'm not going to make a fool out of myself."

"How can you make a fool out of yourself by telling us what you found?"

"I didn't find anything. It's none of my business, anyway. You're the wizards — you help him."

"If you didn't find anything, why did you tell the queen to send for a wizard?" Kedrigern demanded.

"Because it's all magic, that's why! It has to be! If you tell them what happened, they'll believe you, but if I — Never mind. Just leave me out of this."

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With a little flirt of her wings that captured the physicians attention at once, Princess said, "If the king doesn't recover, Queen Yulda will rule. Won't that be nice?"

The physician's expression clouded. He licked his lips nervously, but said nothing.

"She'll make a wonderful ruler. So strong-willed. So determined," Princess said, smiling.

Taking a cue, Kedrigern said, "She'll stand for no nonsense, that's certain. She'll make people toe the mark. Heads will roll."

"You must promise not to tell anyone I said this," the physician blurted.

"My dear fellow! Of course we promise," Kedrigern warmly assured him.

Lowering his voice, looking furtively around the room, the physician said, "Lightning. The king was struck by lightning."

"Lightning?" Princess repeated in disbelief.

"But it was a lovely day. Everyone said so!" Kedrigern objected.

"It was a gorgeous day. Best all year. I know. I sat by the window, looking out over that very oak tree, for a full two hours. I heard no thunder. I saw no lightning."

"Yet you say His Majesty was struck by lightning."

"Definitely. I know the signs."

"So you suspect magic."

"Of course. Don't you?"

"It certainly looks that way."

"I've never been comfortable about lightning. It comes out of the heavens, after all. That puts it outside my line. And when it comes out of a clear blue sky . . . well, I just don't want to get involved," said the physician. He appeared to be uneasy even talking about the subject.

"Understandable. Can you tell us anything more?"

The physician shook his head and spread his hands in a gesture of utter helplessness. "The king was struck by lightning. Only, he couldn't have been struck by lightning. There *was* no lightning. What more can I say?"

"Nothing, obviously. Thank you for your help," said Kedrigern.

"I want to see the king recover. We all love His Majesty. But if I tried to tell them. . . ." The physician shrugged. Brightening, he asked, "Now can I look at those wings?"

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Lifting out of reach, Princess called down, "We'll talk about that when the king has his wits."

Unaccompanied, undirected, Kedrigern and Princess made their way down to the kitchen, where they beguiled the cook into preparing them a quick breakfast. Afterward they inspected the oak tree under which Tarpash had been found witless. Princess flew up into the branches and examined everything carefully while Kedrigern studied the ground and lower trunk. They found no traces of a lightning strike.

"That physician is up to something," Kedrigern said grimly.

"He's harmless," Princess said, dismissing the suggestion with a smile.

"Don't be so sure. He had alchemic equipment in his workroom. I saw a cupel and a flask and a very pretty set of balances."

"That doesn't make him an alchemist. Physicians use those things, too."

"He had alchemic texts on his bookshelf," Kedrigern said, with the air of one clinching an argument.

"So do you," Princess pointed out.

"But I need them! I have to know what the competition is up to."

"Maybe he does, too."

They sat under the tree in deep and thoughtful silence for a time, and at length, Princess said, "I don't trust Middry. What if he doesn't really want to marry Belserena? This could be his way of getting out of it."

"He sounded very sincere to me," Kedrigern said.

"Men always do."

Silence returned. After a time, Princess said glumly, "I just can't figure out how. I wouldn't put anything past Yulda, and it wouldn't surprise me if Middry had some plot going, but neither one seems capable of magic."

"They're not. I checked them out," Kedrigern said, holding up his medallion and displaying the Aperture of True Vision at its center. "The physician, too. But he could still be an alchemist."

"Alchemists can't work magic. That's why they're only alchemists," Princess reminded him.

Silence once again. Then Kedrigern snapped his fingers and gave a little laugh. He sprang to his feet and held out his hand. "Come. We're going to ask the queen a few questions," he said, smiling with anticipation.

Princess bounded up. "So you agree with me; that stringy-haired shrew is behind the king's affliction!"

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"His Majesty is playing in the royal sandbox and cannot be disturbed."

"I think it's something far more subtle than that, my dear, but Yulda may be able to help us clear it up."

The queen received them without delay, but before they could speak, she raised a peremptory hand and said, "His Majesty is playing in the royal sandbox and cannot be disturbed."

"Is His Majesty wearing the same clothing he wore on the fateful day?" Kedrigern asked.

"Certainly not. If you must know, he is wearing a yellow sunsuit and a broad-brimmed straw hat — to keep the sun off his head."

"Then we may not have to trouble His Majesty at all. May we see everything the king was wearing when he was found?"

The queen gave a command. Two servants hurried from the chamber. Yulda drummed her fingers on the arms of her chair, frowning impatiently.

"Had His Majesty any enemies?" Kedrigern asked.

"What a ridiculous question! Of course he had enemies. He was a king!"

"Have any of the king's enemies been seen near the castle recently?"

"No. Things have been quiet. Very quiet." Yulda heaved a deep, nostalgic sigh and shook her head sadly. "We're all getting too old for feuding. We're not enemies anymore, not really. We're all survivors now."

"Have you been reconciled with all your old enemies?"

She nodded. "Nothing official. No pacts or treaties or anything of that nature. We've lost interest in the old quarrels, that's all. Half the time we can't remember why we quarreled in the first place. We're content to stay in our castles and keep warm and dry. Leave the bashing and the glory to the young, if they care for that sort of thing." She glanced sourly at her son, who sat by the window fingering a lute. "Some do, and some don't," she concluded.

"Then there's no visiting back and forth?"

"Can't spare the time, wizard. We have our kingdoms to run. Besides, it's too uncomfortable. But they've all been invited to the wedding, and they've all sent lovely presents. Three-quarters of them can't attend, but they all sent presents."

"Aren't presents usually sent to the bride's residence?" Princess asked.

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"Not when she marries *my* boy," snapped the queen.

"These presents are all in the countinghouse, I presume," Kedrigern said.

Yulda and Princess both looked at him with sudden curiosity. Before either woman could speak, the servants returned bearing a pile of royal clothing. Under Kedrigern's direction, they laid it out in orderly arrangement on the floor. Yulda and Middry joined the two wizards around the display.

"Is this exactly what the king was wearing when he was discovered under the oak?" Kedrigern asked.

"Yes. I remember very clearly," said the queen, and the prince nodded in agreement.

"Nothing missing? No rings, amulets, brooch, torque, or other bit of jewelry?"

"Tarpash didn't like such things. The only jewelry he wore was a gold ring that had been handed down in his family for generations," said the queen.

"And his crown, mother," Middry pointed out. "Father liked to wear a crown. He said it made him feel kingly."

Pointing to the display, Kedrigern said, "The ring and the crown are not here."

"The ring is on his finger. Hasn't been off it since before we were married. The crown. . . ." Yulda paused, scowling fiercely in the effort to remember.

Cautiously, Middry said, "He was wearing it at breakfast that morning. I'm sure he was."

"Yes! Yes, he was," said the queen. "The little openwork crown he always wore around the castle. I remember now."

"But when you saw His Majesty, Your Majesty, he had a boot on his head. Was the crown lying nearby?"

"No. In fact . . . I don't believe I've seen that crown since. I'm sure I haven't."

"As I suspected," Kedrigern murmured, nodding and stroking his chin. "Your Majesty, we must visit the countinghouse."

"You shall have free access, wizard."

"Both of us, Your Majesty."

Yulda's formidable jaw set firmly. Her nostrils dilated. After a pause, she said, "Very well. Both of you."

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"All we require is access to the room where the wedding presents are kept. There is a list of items, with the names of the senders, is there not?"

"The Treasurer will provide it," said the queen. She turned to a servant and commanded, "Summon the Lord Treasurer!"

Once they were inside the room of gifts, with torches burning brightly in all the sockets on the wall, the Lord Treasurer dismissed the servants and excused himself. Word had somehow spread that the king's affliction was now definitely known to be the result of magic, and a degree of uneasiness was perceptible in everyone about the castle. Kedrigern and Princess were left to themselves: exactly the working conditions they preferred.

Kedrigern surveyed the jumble of ornate objects and said, "This could take some time."

"Why don't we just go down the list?" Princess suggested.

"No need, my dear. I know exactly what I'm looking for: a crown, coronet, or diadem, with a certain jewel set in a certain position."

"There's a crown! See it, right there, hanging from the trunk of the silver elephant with the emerald tusks?!" Princess cried excitedly, pointing to a figure standing on a chest before them.

Kedrigern took up the crown and examined it. He shook his head. "Wrong type. This is probably the one Tarpash was wearing when he entered. He took it off when he tried on the other."

"What other? Why the sudden interest in crowns?" Princess asked.

"Because Tarpash wasn't wearing one when he was found, and that's completely out of character for him. I haven't seen Tarpash for over thirty years, but even as a young king, he was a great believer in wearing a crown. He had summer and winter crowns, indoor and outdoor crowns, crowns for hunting, dancing, affairs of state, hawking, riding — anything and everything Tarpash did, he had a special crown to go with it. Even his nightcap was embroidered to resemble a crown."

"Kings do have their eccentricities," Princess said.

"Indeed they do. And his was well known. Anyone nursing an old grudge against Tarpash would know that crowns were his weakness. He couldn't see one without wanting to try it on."

"But wouldn't an enemy be more likely to employ a poisoned crown?"

Kedrigern shook his head. "Too obvious. Also easily traced. There'd be

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war in no time. No, we're dealing with a subtle enemy. A man might lose his wits for any number of reasons. Who would suspect a crown sent as a wedding present? And if the wedding has to be called off—"

"The present would be returned, and no one would ever know! That's absolutely brilliant!" Princess exclaimed.

"Thank you, my dear," Kedrigern said humbly.

"I meant the plot. But it was also a nice piece of deduction on your part."

"I like it myself. But unless we find the crown, it's all hot air."

"Let's get to work, then. I'll take the right side of the room; you take the left," said Princess, rolling back her sleeves.

Smiling placidly, Kedrigern reached into his tunic and drew out his medallion. "There's a much easier way," he said, raising it to his eye. He surveyed the chamber, moving his gaze slowly across the piles of gaudy, the heaps of ostentatious, the isolated beautiful, pausing now and then to lower the medallion and rub his eye. "A lot of interference in here," he explained. "Some of these objects were once enchanted, spelled, or cursed, and the residual magic fogs up my reception."

"Can I do anything to help?" Princess asked.

Kedrigern resumed his slow search, his gaze ascending a great mound of baubles in a corner of the room. "Ah," he said softly. "Yes, my dear, you can be a great help. At the top of that heap — flung there by Tarpash in his frenzy — is a golden crown with a cloudy stone on top. Would you mind . . . ?

Princess lifted off with a soft hum of wings. She hovered over the pile for a moment, searching, then snatched up the crown and flourished it overhead before returning to Kedrigern's side.

"Is this the fiendish device?" she asked.

"It is," he said, studying the milky stone through the Aperture of True Vision. "Subtle, indeed. Diabolically so."

"But lovely. That's a magnificent opal."

"Enchanted crystal," he corrected her.

"Oh, surely an opal," she protested. "Look at that vague, fuzzy, clouded interior."

"A perceptive description, my dear. You're looking at the king's wits."

* * *

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THE PROCESS of reversal was simple, but not without an element of risk. Kedrigern pried the cloudy crystal free, turned it upside down, and reinserted it in its setting. He then recited a long and complicated spell over it. This done, he held it out to Tarpash, shaking it gently to attract the king's attention.

The monarch, who had been roused from his nap, hurriedly dressed, and plopped down in his throne, was in a cranky state. But at the sight of the crown, his face lit up. He screamed, "I want! I want!", and made a grab for it. With Yulda assisting, and Middry close at hand, under Kedrigern's watchful eye — it would have been disastrous to put it on upside down — the king settled the crown on his head.

A wink of bright light flickered through the room, like lightning from nowhere. Tarpash twitched and blinked his eyes. He reached up to remove the crown, and studied the clear crystal stone at its center. "A pretty thing, but uncomfortable," he said. "Where is my regular Wednesday crown?" Noticing Kedrigern, he cried, "Who are you? I know you, don't I? And who is that lovely lady with the wings? How did you get in here? Am I enchanted?"

"Not anymore, Your Majesty," Kedrigern said.

"But I have been, haven't I? My head feels as if it's been squeezed," said the king, rubbing his temples.

"In a sense, that's exactly what happened. Your Majesty's wits were stolen and locked in that crystal on the crown," Kedrigern explained.

"They were? For how long? What of my son's wedding?"

Middry, beaming, said, "It's still four days off, father. Kedrigern hurried here and removed the spell."

"Kedrigern! Of course. I didn't recognize you at first. It's been a long time. And this lovely lady — a fairy princess?"

"A very human princess, Your Majesty. This is my wife and fellow wizard, Princess."

"My thanks to you both. All our thanks. You will be generously rewarded," said the king, signaling to the Treasurer. "But would you mind telling me what happened? I remember going to the countinghouse and looking over the wedding gifts, and then. . . ." Tarpash gestured in a manner expressive of bewilderment.

"Your eye fell on that crown, a gift from Zilfric of the Long Hand," said Kedrigern. "You liked it. You took off the crown you were wearing, hung it

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on the trunk of the elephant figure given by Inuri the Footloose, and put on the new crown. The crystal, an object of great potency and heavily enchanted, drew forth your wits in a single dazzling instant. In distraction, you ran from the countinghouse and collapsed under the oak tree, where you were found soon after with nothing to indicate the cause of your affliction. You had the symptoms of a man struck by lightning. In the purely magical sense, that's what happened. But there was no lightning from the sky that day. Your condition was a profound mystery."

Tarpash smiled benignly on Kedrigern and Princess. "But you solved it. And you will be rewarded. And Zilfric will be punished, as soon as I can think of something nasty enough."

"If I may make a suggestion . . . ," Kedrigern said.

"Please do."

"Hoist him with his own petard."

"We'll hoist him any way we can," snapped Yulda, her large jaw jutting forward.

"Tell us your recommendation, Kedrigern, and if it likes us well, we will leave the details in your hands," said Tarpash.

"It will take no more than a day to arrange — two at the most — if I may enlist the royal goldsmith."

"He is at your service," said the king with a wave of his hand. "Tell us your plan."

With a smile of anticipation, Kedrigern said, "First we will remove all traces of enchantment from the crystal and the crown."

"The crown is enchanted, too! Oh, villainy!" cried the queen.

"This was a very thorough piece of work, Your Majesties. It is the doing of one Gargumfius, an exceptionally malicious sorcerer known to be in the employ of Zilfric. The Gargumfius touch is unmistakable."

"Get the sorcerer, too!" said the king with a grim scowl.

"I plan to, Your Majesty. Once everything is completely disenchanted, I will have the goldsmith replace the stone in its original position. It will then be returned to Zilfric, accompanied by a letter."

"A letter? Is that all? I thought you were going to string the blackguard up!" said Tarpash angrily.

"I will, Your Majesty, but I will do it with subtlety," Kedrigern assured him. "Your Majesty will inform him that the entire royal family has worn the crown for lengthy periods of time, and has benefited in innumerable

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ways, mental and physical: deeper understanding of affairs of state, mastery of economic theories, improved memory, keener eyesight, better digestion, and greater sympathy for fellow rulers, which latter quality has moved you to return the crown, which you consider too precious to keep to yourselves. I leave it to Your Majesties to imagine the effect this communication will have on Zilfric, and his stratagems of revenge, and his dealings with Gargumfius."

Tarpash considered the proposal for a time, then laughed aloud and clapped his hands. "Capital! Much better than a punitive expedition. Those things are always such a bother. And so expensive, too."

"But will they suffer enough? We want them to suffer!" Yulda said fiercely. "Why don't we just go after them and string them up?"

"Because I don't feel like going to war. Besides, this will keep Zilfric so busy, suspecting and accusing and fighting with his sorcerer, that he won't have time to bother us or anyone else. Get to it at once, Kedrigern. But first," said the king, summoning the Treasurer to his side, bearing a small carven ebony casket, "your reward."

Opening the casket, Tarpash withdrew a delicate necklace of gold-set rubies, which he placed around Princess's neck. To Kedrigern, he gave the black casket, saying, "Since we know of your dislike for personal adornment of any kind, we will reward you simply." The wizard smiled when he heard the clink of coins within, and felt the unmistakable weight of gold in his hands.

"And we invite you to be honored guests at our son's wedding," Tarpash concluded, beaming.

"We accept with deep gratitude, Your Majesty," said Princess before Kedrigern could come up with a reason to duck out of the invitation and hurry home to Silent Thunder Mountain.

"We are honored indeed," said Kedrigern with a deep bow and a sigh of resignation.

The wedding of Belserena and Middry was a splendid spectacle. The feasting was elaborate, the tournament a great butchery, the entertainment elegant, the revelry ebullient. When the wizards set out for home after a ten days' stay, even Princess had to admit to satiety as far as her social needs were concerned. Kedrigern was desperate for peace, quiet, and solitude; so much so that he spoke scarcely a word until they had traveled

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half a day. Only when they stopped by a brook for a midday rest and a light snack did he relax a bit.

"It's wonderful to be going home at last," he said, sprawling on the cool grass.

"The past two weeks have been quite eventful," said Princess wistfully.

"Horribly so. All those people, and the noise . . . not a minute to ourselves . . . always something going on." He shuddered at the memory.

"It was grand," she sighed.

"It was a vision of Hell," he murmured.

They reclined on the grass in silence for a time, until Kedrigern propped himself on his elbows, gazed up at the sky, and, apropos of nothing, observed, "The best part is that I solved the problem without using magic."

In an instant, Princess, too, was sitting up. "What about the reversing spell on the crystal?"

"That was an afterthought. The important things were achieved by sheer intelligence and reasoning," he said, tapping his forehead meaningfully.

"Isn't magic the reason people summon a wizard? Isn't it what they pay for?"

Irritably, Kedrigern said, "They pay me for what I *know*, not what I do. I'm not an entertainer; I'm a wizard."

"And wizards do magic," Princess said, as if that settled everything.

"When they must," Kedrigern added.

Princess moved closer and patted him on the hand. When he remained silent, she kissed him sweetly and said, "Never mind. It was a very impressive piece of reasoning. I don't believe there's another wizard who could have worked it out without resorting to magic."

Mollified, Kedrigern sought a way to respond to her gracious gesture. Taking her hand, he said, "It was truly regal of you, my dear, to treat Yulda so well. You were downright friendly. I know she's a difficult woman, but—"

"Difficult? I've known trolls with better manners! And that voice of hers. . . ." Princess shook her head and made a little moue of distaste.

"All the more credit to you for treating her so nicely."

"I was thinking of Belserena. Sweet child. I didn't want to do anything to spoil her wedding."

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"You were extremely generous to Belserena. That was a lovely pendant you gave her."

"Well, we were honored guests. That sort of thing is expected of us."

"It is? I'm never sure about those things."

"I know," said Princess resignedly.

"It all seems so unnecessary. All this passing back and forth of gaudy baubles and trinkets. Like that necklace Tarpash gave you. It's a beautiful thing, and exquisitely made, but when will you actually wear it?"

"It's the thought that counts."

He cast a dubious glance at her. "Then why don't kings and princes and that lot just think well of each other, and stop exchanging plundered jewelry? It's all plunder, in one way or another, you know."

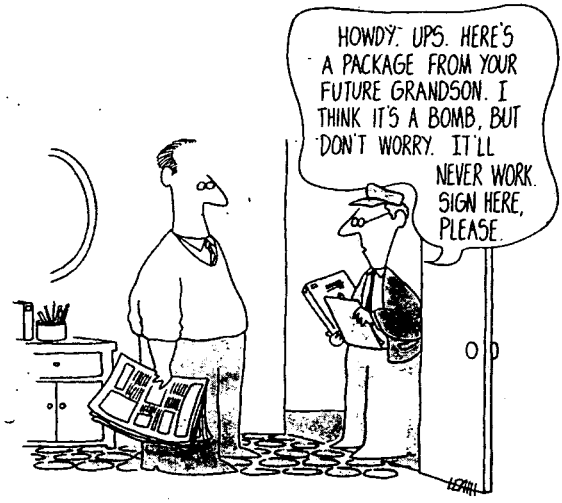
"It has its practical uses," Princess said with a sly, knowing smile.

"Oh?"

"You don't think I'd give that dear girl a mere trinket. Surely you know I placed a spell on it for her."

"My dear—"

"A simple spell for tenacity in disputation." Princess stood and made a gay and graceful pirouette on the grass, fairly glowing with the satisfaction of work well done. "Just what Belserena needs — and Yulda deserves."



UNITED PARADOX SERVICE

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Madeleine Robins ("Mules," April 1990) offers a new story about a woman who is separated from her astronaut husband by millions of miles, and who finds herself haunted by something beyond anyone's understanding.

Papa's Gone A-Hunting

By Madeleine E. Robins

RHYTHM BUILDS IN the wheel's spin; my foot taps absently. Trochaic tetrameter; 4/4: *How many miles to Babylon? Threescore miles and ten, sir. Can I get there by candlelight? Yes, if your legs are long and light, there and back again, sir.* The clay is centered. I dip my fingers in water again and begin, pressing my thumbs inward, drawing the clay up slowly until it blossoms into a bowl. Two wet fingers into the center, smoothing the inside of the shape. The wheel's motor purrs gutturally, like a cat: *Bye, Baby Bunting. Papa's gone a-hunting, To get a little rabbit skin to wrap his precious baby in.* Now draw the clay up to a neck: the bowl becomes a vase. Let the top blossom outward again: raw edges of clay spread like an open hand, ready to cradle flowers.

I hit the switch, and the wheel spins to a stop. Now the finishing work, trimming edges, shaping one drooping petal of the vase's lip, smoothing the rounded base. Karen says vases are womb-structures; damned Freudians see sex in everything. Finally, cutting the vase from the wheel,

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wire biting through the wet heaviness of clay. I move the vase to a drying rack as carefully as if I were carrying a day-old child.

Magee is gone for the day; he left the radio playing. As I reach for a sponge, the news starts. Continued turmoil in the Mideast; an improvement in the dollar abroad; terrorist attack on the plankton farms in the Gulf of Mexico; new data from the *Valkyrie-IV* Mars mission.

"Hello, Tom," I say by habit. *How many miles to Babylon?*

The studio floor is dappled with the peach-colored light of late afternoon. Time to go home: tomorrow is Friday. I clean my tools, put them with the smock in my locker, pull out my jacket and bag. The studio cat, which has routes of entrance and egress unknown to the rest of us, yawns at my going; Magee must have fed him earlier. A last look behind me: already the new vase is drying to the ashy white of unfired porcelain. Snap off the radio and the lights; fish through my bag for the keys; lock the door. Drive home.

Instructions for a quiet life.

Friday. A postcard morning that defines October: blue and red-gold and clear. The sun is warm on my face when I leave our apartment, but the wind snaps at my jaw; a warning not to get too complacent. For a while I saw Karen on Fridays, but it got to be too much, to go from the Communications Center straight to therapy. Just talking to Tom is upheaval enough without taking the feelings apart and examining them. Now Friday is just the day I talk to Tom.

There's no reason to talk on Fridays, particularly, but NASA prefers these weekly, scheduled calls. With exceptions: birthdays, holidays, emergencies. So every Friday I sit in this little room whose privacy is an illusion (NASA and half the world monitor the link with *Valkyrie* constantly), and, through signal breakups and endless transmission delays, I hear Tom's sweet, distant voice.

"Janie?"

"Who else?" The awkward exchanges of two people, X-million miles apart, trying to assuage a world of longing. "What's new up there?"

He tells me about the readings; I tell him about my pots, the show I'm in, the commissions I'm getting. I tell him I love him. He says he loves me, too. We are funny, very casual, very stiff-upper-lip, and sign off as we always do. Tom says: "Four hundred twenty-three days down." I calculate

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rapidly and answer: "Three hundred twenty-four days left." Less than a year to go.

When the red eye above the camera dims and Tom goes back to work, I sit in the little room for a moment, holding on to the sound of his voice. Then out, smiling automatically at the receptionist.

Go to a movie. Take a drive. When I did see Karen on Fridays, at least it filled up the afternoon. I can't work on Fridays: my mind is lost in the stars; my hands are not steady. So I drive through town. Stopped at a traffic light that lasts forever, there are a woman and infant in the next car, the baby strapped into a car seat. He waves his arms orchestrally, directing the traffic sounds while his mother stares impatiently at the line of cars in front of her. After a moment (the little boy's hair is blond, backlit by a halo of sunshine), I look away, too. Fridays are not easy.

"Fridays suck," I murmur. The light changes; the car pulls away; the little boy is lost to me. Behind me, someone leans on the horn, and I blink and put my foot on the accelerator and am in motion again, driving aimlessly for hours, out of the city into the hills and back again, a long, lovely, mindless drive. I turn only when the growling of my stomach reminds me that I am hungry and there is nothing to eat at the apartment. The streets are blue with approaching dusk by the time I near the supermarket.

I shop for one, wondering what Tom will have for dinner tonight. In the aisle where they keep baby food, I make selections in my head, imagining jars and packets. Davy would have half a dozen teeth won through fretting and sleepless nights, the apartment littered with teething rings and toys. Peas, pears, strained beef, and arrowroot biscuits. I imagine my lost boy watching wide-eyed as I buy his supper, gurgling at the black woman in the yellow coat who stares at me staring at the toddler's meals.

The drive home is short. At the door I balance three bags of groceries as I grope for my house key one-handed; the seam of one plastic grocery sack is beginning to give way. All in a rush, the door is open, and I run in, dropping pens and scraps of paper from my open purse, and shove two grocery bags onto the counter. There is no room there for the third, which I dump on the sofa until I can retrieve my keys from the door and pick up the trail of small things seeded in the carpet.

It is only when I turn around that I see my baby nestling into the cushions of the sofa. He is reaching for a can of juice that has rolled away from him. He has my dark hair and his father's deep blue eyes, and his

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fingers, even for a child of eleven months, are long and sensitive. He smiles and laughs and reaches again, and I can't help but laugh, too, while terror turns my stomach to water. In all these months of pretending, I have never *seen* him before. I close my eyes to stop the tears, and when I open them again, there is a bag of groceries on the sofa with one lone can of juice rolling off the edge to fall without a sound into the carpet.

No baby.

In the bathroom I splash icy water on my face, trying to remember the urgency of defrosting food, a leaking milk carton. My reflection in the mirror is haggard. Haunted. Only to be expected when you have seen a ghost. Now when I look down at my hands as I wash them, I see Davy's long fingers reaching for that damned can of juice. I *am* coming unglued; I've been playing this dangerous game for too long.

I look past my reflection in the mirror as if my voice could travel through it. I cry, "Tommy!", knowing he cannot help me: my husband is somewhere between Mars and the orbits of LaGrange. He was gone when I miscarried, and in all our Fridays together, all our talks, I have never told him about Davy, the son I've carried and nursed and sung to, the fantasy. I know it's a fantasy; I'm not crazy. I just needed something to hold on to for a while, when it happened. Then it became a habit, a comfortable game. I knew it was pretend; I've known all along that it was just pretend. Until tonight.

I am afraid to go back in the living room. He might be there. Or he might not. I could not say which scares me more. Finally, though, I do go back, and there is only the mess I left: ice cream and a spill of milk on the counter, the contents of my purse littering the floor. I pick it all up, put it all away, forcing myself to look at the couch as I do; there is no baby there. When I am done, I make myself a very stiff drink and retreat to the bedroom, where there's no haunting yet, and for the rest of the night, I am entirely alone, no visitation except a phantom scent of talcum powder.

In the morning, Saturday, I rationalize: nerves; I was tired; it was Friday. I go to the studio as early as I can, but Magee is there before me, his graying hair already grayer with the thick dust of the clay he's working. He greets me from his concentration with a grunt; his eyes never leave the wheel. I get out my smock, tie my hair back, inspect Thursday's work and

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find it good. Then, with a mass of clay in one hand, I go to the wedging board. The studio cat rubs his jaw along my heel, marking me as his. Mozart's Thirty-ninth Symphony plays in the sunlit room; except for the radio, there is no living sound, from Magee, the cat, or me.

I lose track of time when I am working. The clay is wedged, settled onto the wheel, and I envision what I want of it. A shallow bowl, almost a platter, with one elongated side that I will glaze with a clear gold. The image in my head is beautiful. A healthy image, I think. Immediately, I know what an unhealthy image is, and there he is in my head, the dark-eyed baby. I can almost see him settled in a playpen in the corner, where I have imagined him often enough before. Only *almost* see him, I remind myself. It's just a game.

"Jane, you O.K.?"

I jump guiltily. Magee's voice is a raspy tenor, like a flute with sand in it, and in the stillness, it is startling. "Fine," I say. My voice is a squeak to my ears.

"You look shitty," he says factually. "You eating O.K.?"

"Yeah." Thank God he doesn't ask how I am sleeping.

"Any new word from the Astronaut?" Magee has turned off his wheel and is watching me. "Tom doing O.K.?"

"Says so," I say. I have known Magee for years — we have been teacher, companion, friend to each other; but the renegade Magee sees nothing to my husband but his uniform. In turn, Tom regards Magee as a shaggy, shambling, middle-aged kid: one of Jane's strays. Magee calls Tom the Astronaut, and eyes me with edgy protectiveness.

He is still watching me. His eyes are dark and fringed with long, dusty lashes. I will not see the baby's face again, I insist to myself. I am not crazy. Something must flicker across my face: "C'mon, Janie, what's going on?" Magee asks.

"Nothing." My voice is too loud. "Nothing, Magee. Just a little tired. I get a little tired, that's all."

"Bullshit, there's tired, and there's looking like you're seeing ghosts." he turns back to his wheel, looks at the bowl growing there as if it were an alien artifact, throws a wet cloth over it, and stands up. "Drop the clay and have some coffee," he orders quietly.

We drink coffee from plastic mugs, make patchy conversation, keeping it light for a while. Until finally Magee asks, "What's eating at you?"

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"Nothing's eating at me," I say coldly, knowing he won't believe me. Magee has the trick of knowing my internal temperature, as Tom does. But Tommy and I have a pact to ignore the fevers — with the distance between us, what else can we do? Magee doesn't believe in that kind of tact: he wants everything ripped open to light and air.

"Right," he says. "Ever since your miscarriage, you've been tightening in on yourself, like no one can touch you."

"Magee, I miss my husband. I'm *entitled.* That has nothing to do with the — with the miscarriage." As I say the words, I remember the baby on my couch last night, the scent of him on the air. I shiver. "I'm O.K."

"Right. Have you talked to *him* about it?"

"About what?" I stonewall, wondering if the whole world can see the craziness that suddenly seems to well up in me. "We talked yesterday; I'm fine; he's fine. Lay off, will you?" I twist away from the gray regard of Magee's eyes that doubt and love at the same time. With my back to him, I hear Magee mutter something, but I don't catch the words. "What?" I ask, and turn back to him.

"You're filling the studio with weird vibes. You're scared about something, and it's driving *me* crazy. Will you for Christ's sake talk to me?"

From somewhere far off, I hear my voice, thin and high, panicky. "Dammit, Magee, back off. I'm fine." I repeat it over and over: *I'm fine,* as he gathers me up in a strong, dusty hug and lets me cry. His work shirt with its permanent patina of clay dust is smooth against my forehead.

At last I am done with crying, and he says again, "Talk to me, Janie." His heart beats with a steady rhythm under my cheek: *Bye, Baby Bunting. Papa's gone a-hunting* . . . and across the room my baby sits on the floor, smiling a dark-eyed smile like Tom's, watching his mother.

"No!" I push Magee away so hard that he falls against a table. Dimly, as I watch the baby waving to me from the playpen in the corner, I know Magee has followed my gaze, trying to see what I see. I ignore him. I take a step toward the playpen; if I reach for the child, surely he will be there, warm and sweet and wriggling. "Baby?" I whisper.

"Janie." Magee's voice pulls me away from the hallucination. In a moment there is no playpen, no dark-eyed baby, just the corner of the studio with dust motes swimming in the midday sunlight. Magee drags me out of the studio, out into the parking lot where everything is breeze and bright light. His hand on my arm is strong but tentative, as if he is not sure

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what he holds; under the brush of gray brows, his eyes are worried. For a while we sit on the low fender of his old red sports car. "Was it Tom you saw?" he asks at last.

"Not Tommy," I say. It's a relief to tell someone. "My baby."

Magee sags, head in his hands, not looking at me at all.

FOR ALMOST an hour, we stand in clear, chilly sunlight; Magee keeps his distance as if afraid to touch me, and I shiver in the breeze as I explain it to him. How I began, lying muzzy and unnaturally cheerful in a hospital bed with the slow drip of drugs and blood in my arm. Wondering: Would the baby have been a boy or girl? With Tom's coloring or mine? What would we have named it? Imagining the expression on Tommy's face when he came home to greet his child. Just a game, harmless, to make the losses easier; imagining baby clothes, baby food, toys, games. Finally I come to last night, tasting the blend of panic and longing that become familiar to me in the telling.

"He was just *there.* Watching me. The way he was in the studio just now." I stutter over a laugh. "Like my grandmother used to say: out of the everywhere into the here." Magee's look is blank. "When I asked her where babies came from, Gran told me they came out of the *everywhere* into the *here.* Like swarms of free-floating molecules coalescing into a baby." I giggle stupidly.

Magee looks at me. "Janie, you have to stop it."

"I know." I do know. "But —"

"No but. They lock people up for a lot less than this."

"I *know,* Magee. I could have stopped. But — now he's real."

For the first time, Magee turns fully to me, grabs me ungently by the shoulders. "*He's not real.*" His eyes fix mine with hot intensity; he is afraid enough to be angry, angry enough to be afraid. "You have to stop."

Promises rise to my lips: I'll stop before Tommy gets home; I'll stop next month after Davy's first birthday; I'll stop; I promise.... The flash of panic that wells up in me is so sudden, so sharp, that I say the thing that really scares me. "I can't lose him again."

He grimaces. "Jesus, Janie. What does your shrink say about all this?"

"Karen doesn't know about it," I say sulkily. Magee says nothing, just looks at me gravely until I shrug. "It started out like a game. I needed *something.*"

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"You never told her anything about your little game?"

"Dammit, Magee, what was I supposed to say? Oh yeah, Karen: I've been pretending I had the baby for months now; I just didn't want to bother you. . . . I don't need Karen. I'll take care of it myself."

Magee's gentle eyes and voice are inexorable. "*Now*, Janie." I look at my old friend and see his determination and know, *know*, that he is right. For a moment, Magee becomes my enemy. Looking at his eyes, I feel as if I were journeying through my need and his sympathy, through his love and my fear, until I arrive at the absolute necessity to destroy this ghost.

"Now," I echo.

For days I am good. Each time I think of the baby, I remind myself: There is no baby. When I murmur *Davy* under my breath, I counter: There is no Davy. As the fantasy was built, it can be unbuilt. It's not so difficult.

Still, I must seem different somehow. On Monday in therapy, Karen waits patiently, fruitlessly, for me to tell her about the thing that is weighing on me. On Friday, Tom's grainy image on the video asks if I have been eating well. "You look too thin, babe. You O.K.?" Tommy speaks awkwardly; the powerlessness in his voice when he worries about me hurts, and I rush to tell him I am fine; all is well.

Magee watches me.

"I'm all right," I tell him. "I'm doing what you said: I'm stopping. No daydreams, no browsing in the baby food section. Relax, Magee. You were right. I'm stopping."

Still he watches me. Every day in the studio, he worries his clay, building and tearing down pots and vases, his concentration broken up. All right, his problem.

Another week. I go to movies, to a party thrown by one of the other *Valkyrie* wives, try to avoid the dangerous silence of my apartment. I turn away from dangerous thoughts with the self-righteous virtue of a reformed addict. I am good, so good. And somehow Friday comes around again. In the cubicle, hemmed in by gray-carpeted particleboard, I smile at the red eye of the camera and see Tom's face in the monitor.

"Hey, schweethaht." I roll my eyes at his bad Bogart and start reporting the events of my week. Somewhere between dinner at Sue Ghiadelli's and the film that I saw last night, I hear myself saying: "Tommy, do you ever think about the baby?"

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Someone else is moving my lips, making these sounds. Not once in more than a year have I ever brought Tom into the game. Now I am horrified to hear myself prattling to him: Would it have been a boy, his eyes, my smile? How old when he sat up, began to crawl, took a step. The powdery baby-smell of him, his first word, the feathery softness of his hair. . . .

"Janie, hey —," Tommy breaks in. "God, sweetheart, I know how it hurt you to lose the baby; it hurt me, too. I hate being so far away from you —"

The voice that isn't mine tumbles over his, cuts him off. "I'm just saying, do you think —" The voice gives away all my secrets. Somewhere inside, *I* am howling: Shut up! But my lips keep moving, and the words keep tumbling out.

"Stop it —" Tom, foiled by the distance and transmission lag, looks helpless; on the monitor screen, one hand reaches futilely to draw me across the miles. "Dammit, Janie, I can't do anything. When I'm home, we'll have time; I promise you —" He is so helpless, as bad as a baby. Something about the low-pitched frustration in his tone stops the voice at last.

"I'm sorry," I finish lamely. "I guess — I was just thinking about some of this stuff the other day."

"Don't," he advises curtly. Then, more gently: "Janie, don't do this to yourself. Talk to someone, will you? And when I get home, we'll try again; I won't be so far away. O.K.? *Please?*"

"I'm sorry. I'm O.K. Don't worry." The silence between us, stretched by transmission delays, seems an hour long. I smile: "I'm all right, Major. No lie."

"O.K. then." In response to a signal off-camera, he nods. "Dammit. Look they need me. I have to — love you —" He looks away from the screen again.

"Hey, Tommy." Superstitiously, I call him back. "Three hundred ten days to go."

After a pause, he turns back, his attention already somewhere else. "Right. Four hundred thirty-seven gone. See you soon."

"I love you," I say, as the red eye dims.

My driving is aimless without the satisfaction of being numbing. I can't turn off my mind, and what I keep thinking of is the baby, and the

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scene with Tommy. This isn't going to be as easy as I thought.

It's dusk when I pull into the parking lot at the studio. Magee's car is still there, and the light throws a warm stripe on the pavement. I enter the studio quietly, not to work, but just to be around a friend, to see work being done. When I look at Magee's drying rack, I realize he has had a good day indeed; three new pieces stand there. He is hunched over a fourth on his wheel, breaking the bad streak of the past week or so with a vengeance. Sometimes the work goes like that. Without saying anything, I perch on a stool near the sink and watch. He's doing something fine and finicky: from behind, his back is tense; his elbows describe small circles as he works.

At last he gives a snort of disgust and tears down the pot, throwing chunks of torn clay into the bin. "Dammit, dammit," he mutters. Then turns to face me, roaring, "You couldn't allow me one goddamned day to get some work done!" His wiry eyebrows and beard make a fierce gray frame for his anger. "Dammit, Janie, you drag that kid with you wherever you go; and when it's here, I can't fucking work."

Can't work. Magee's eyes are desperate; his anger has the primitive savagery of a man seized from his lover in mid-thrust. "Oh God, Magee," I say, appalled. *Can't work.* "Magee, I'm sorry." I back away from his anger. He is the best friend I have on earth, and he's breaking under the weight of my dream. Everyone has such different needs: Tommy needs the stars; Magee, an unclouded place to work. Janie: her son, work, husband, friend.

Magee stands and watches me, fury ebbing. He is panting lightly, and his face has gone pale with the release of his anger. Who reaches out first, I can't tell. We are holding each other and shaking, gasping for air.

I realize what I have come to say. "Help me."

"What we have to do," Magee says solemnly, "is make magic."

We are in Magee's apartment, ten minutes' drive from the studio, eating supper. He leans earnestly over the table so that the steam rising from his chili — piled with cheese, onions, jalapeños — catches the light in his beard. "Magic," he says again. "Ritual. The psychotherapy of the ancients."

"Ritual." I take a bite of my chili. "You have anything in mind?"

"I just had an idea. Let me think a minute." He turns in his seat and starts to look through the books on the shelf behind him. Staring at his back, I think: I don't want the situation analyzed; I want to be left alone with my baby. I can feel muscles tighten as this mulishness plays over my

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face. I don't care, I just don't; to hell with Magee and Tommy. I want my baby.

"Janie?" I look up, and Magee is handing me a small stack of books. *The Golden Bough; The Way of the Sufi;* various Casteneda and more obscure books on mysticism and the occult. "Start with exorcisms."

"Davy's not some kind of incubus."

Magee, book in his left hand and spoon in his right, shakes his head. "What *is* he, then?" We read.

I wake in the morning on Magee's couch, my head uncomfortably pillowed on *The Golden Bough.* The lights are still on, and Magee is asleep on his back on the floor: his mouth is open, and each thumb marks his place in a book by his side. I hop over him, rattle in the kitchen until I find the coffee and pot and a cache of sticky breakfast rolls. The smell wakes Magee: he shuffles into the kitchen, leading with his nose, and myopically pours himself a cup of coffee.

"Ummmghh." He waves his cup at me in acknowledgment.

"Thank you. Good morning," I say.

"Ugghmm." He takes another sip. "Did we find anything last night?"

"Lists of stuff. Last thing I remember was you talking about the Sufis. . . ." Through the kitchen door, I can see papers and books piled on the table in the living room. "Something about a doll, or a bowl, or something."

"Right. Kachina dolls," Magee agrees. "Boats. Vessels to put spirits in. The somebody-or-others of Malaysia trick smallpox into a boat, and then send it downriver to some other tribe—"

I don't believe this. "Magee, what am I going to do? Go down to the waterfront and hire a rowboat? Maybe *you* should talk to Karen—"

"Dammit, Janie, you want to go to your shrink with this — you could have done that months ago." He takes another long swallow of coffee and considers. "Look, give me thirty-six hours."

"And then do what? Go to the attorney general with what I know? What are you thinking of, Magee?"

He shakes his head. "I'll tell you tomorrow around" — he checks his watch — "around 9:00 P.M., in the studio. Meet me there." My expression must be more irritated than I realize, for Magee comes to me, puts his big hands on my shoulders, and looks at me hard. "Janie, if we can't lay this ghost of yours to rest my way, I'll drive you to your shrink. I'll make you

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go." He shakes me gently. "Go home and sleep or something. Read a book. But meet me tomorrow night at the studio. O.K.?"

When I get to the studio, it's dark, filled with blue shadows that dance like ghosts. Magee has left only one light on, and he sits across the room in the dark, arms crossed, slumped with his head on his chest. When I snap the lights on and the ghosts disappear, Magee straightens up like a shot. "It's done," he says quietly.

"What's done?"

He gestures toward the table, where a new pot stands. It is short and rounded — chubby — with a beauty that is potent and slightly comical. The lid stands next to it, and I can see how it will complete the pot's soft curve. I walk around the table, admiring the soft matte glow of the porcelain. Even unglazed and unfired, it's a handsome thing. Magee has laid in a design in colored clay, an earthy red figure that looks like a character in Chinese or Japanese. "Magee, it's beautiful. Is that what you've been working on?" He nods. I wonder what this had to do with Davy, and hope he won't tell me, but he does.

"It's to put the baby in," he says.

Oh my God. "It's beautiful," I say again. "But what are you talking about?"

"The ritual I was talking about. You need to lay that whole fantasy to rest, and I wanted to give you a concrete, beautiful place to put it." Magee comes to stand beside me. In the cool of the studio, he feels like the only source of heat in the world. I should say something appreciative — the pot is exquisite. I say, "You're nuts. It won't work."

"Try," he coaxes.

I would turn away, but something in his voice, and the sight of his beautiful work, stops me. I start to shrug out of my denim jacket. I owe him something. Besides, it can't work. "What do you want me to do?"

Magee takes the jacket, kneads briefly at my neck. "You have to make up a ritual that will work for you. Look at the pot; think about — uhh, it. Him. Davy."

"Dammit, Magee, if I *think* about Davy, I won't go through with this stupid —" Suddenly this dumb idea scares me, as if it might have a chance.

"Stop it, Janie. Close your eyes. Put your hands down at your sides. Breathe very slowly. Yeah. Now think. About, uh, Davy. Fill yourself up with your feelings about Davy. We want this pot to be Davy, to be a place

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that will hold everything you made Davy." His raspy flute voice is low and persuasive. Distantly, I am surprised at how he has relaxed me, taken my guard away. Obeying Magee's words, I fill myself with Davy's clean sweetness, his smile, his quick, merry look. When Magee stops talking, I stand for a moment more. Then, without planning, I step to the table and run my fingers over the pot, learning its gracious curves that are as rounded as a baby's. I can feel Magee move away behind me as I stroke the cool smoothness of the porcelain. It is soft; I think of Davy's skin, of his hands reaching out to me, of what his weight and volume and solidity would feel like. Something brushes my ankle; I look down, expecting to see the studio cat watching me hungrily.

What I see is my son smiling up at me. It is his hand on my ankle, his fingers scrabbling, touching me. *I can feel him.* It was all make-believe, wasn't it? But I swear I can feel my son's breath on my leg. The panic and joy that fill me are explosive: either I am completely crazy, or my baby is real, and no one, not Tommy or Magee or Karen or anyone, can deny him.

Davy grins, grasps the knee of my pants, and hauls himself to his feet hand over hand, gurgling and smiling. He teeters back and forth trying to find his balance, grinning all the while, and just as he is about to tumble forward, I swoop down and pull him up into my arms. He is warm and heavy; he smells of powder and apple juice, and his skin is the softest thing I have ever touched. "Such a big boy," I murmur singsong into Davy's neck. My breath ruffles his downy hair.

Behind me, I hear a low exhalation: "Jesus. . . ."

I turn and say, "Look," before I see the terror on Magee's face. "No, Magee, it's O.K., really. Here —" I take Davy's hand and reach it out to him. "Feel him! He *is* real; we were wrong. See?"

"Janie." Magee pulls back sharply. "Stop it!"

He sees; I know it. I try one more time. "Magee!" Reaching for him with my hand and Davy's. Magee leans away from us, terrified, refusing to understand. All right, then. "Then leave us alone," I say, and turn my back, rubbing my cheek against the top of Davy's head.

"Janie, please, don't do this. Turn around. Janie. It isn't really there; I don't care what you see or what I see."

Unbidden, I think of Tommy's grainy, broken image on the screen at the center, his smile. I close my eyes, but the image remains.

Magee presses his advantage. "Tom needs you, Janie. I — Janie, you're

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a good potter. You're my friend. I love you." The last words are whispered. "Don't let this *thing* get you."

It's dangerous to hear this. I try one more time to make him understand. "Magee, hold him; feel how real he is. If you can do that, then tell me what to do. Then I'll listen."

Magee slumps against the cabinet; his face is white. For a moment I think I have won, then he holds his arms out. "O.K," he whispers. "I'll do it." His hands tremble, and he watches my face as I unclasp Davy's arms from around my neck. Carefully, I hand my son into my friend's arms. Magee's awkwardness would be comical if the fear that comes from him were not so overwhelming. Davy nestles to Magee's chest, and his searching fingers tangle in Magee's beard. Magee grimaces at the tug.

"Well, Magee?"

He looks down at my baby in his arms. There are tears in his eyes. "You have to ," he whispers at last. "You know you do." He does not look down at my son again, but he is gentle when he pulls Davy's hand away from his beard and hands him back to me. Magee stares at his hands, large and gnarled, filthy with clay dust and dried slip, trembling violently. I have seen those hands, steady and certain, pull the most beautiful shapes from raw clay. With a sigh, Davy settles in my arms, head pressed to my heart.

I look back up at Magee as he takes a step backward, then another, still staring at his hands. Halfway across the room, Magee turns and runs out with a low sound. I start after him, but with Davy's cool weight in my arms, I'm too slow.

The baby's arms twine around my neck as I look down at the pot Magee made for him. Gently, I pull his fingers from my neck and sit him down on the counter next to the pot. "Stay still," I tell him. "Be good for Mama." I turn to call my friend back, but before I can take more than two steps, there is the sound of unfired clay breaking behind me and a sudden burst of clay-smell on the air. When I turn around, Magee's beautiful pot is in ruins on the floor, shattered. Round-eyed, Davy stares at me, one arm still outstretched from the push he gave the pot. Uncertainly, he reaches for me; such a baby.

"*No.*" I make my voice, not loud, not angry, but stern. "*No.*" A voice I rehearsed and fantasized, firm enough to make the baby mind, but not frightening. "*No.*" This time my voice is gentler. "We don't do that. We don't break things just because we're scared." Davy's expression wavers,

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puckers. I pick him up again, settle him so his head rests on my shoulder, and stroke his downy hair, murmuring softly to him, explaining. How we hurt Magee, what we've done. "I'm sorry, sweetie; it was my fault. It wasn't your time. I was afraid to lose you, and I just didn't think. . . ." He frets noisily into my shoulder as I stroke his head. "Shhh, shhh. It's all right, sweetie. Nothing is lost, you know. Not anything. There will be time, sweetie, but not now. We'll be together someday, you and Papa and me. Nothing is lost. Shhoh, sho."

I don't know how long I stand there with my eyes closed, murmuring and crooning, stroking and talking, comforting the baby with all the things I should have told myself months ago. Finally there is a soft brush against my ankle; I look down to see the studio cat watching me dispassionately. My left arm wraps across my belly; the right rests on my shoulder. As if I were hugging myself. There are only the cat and myself in the room. Nothing else, not even a scent of powder on the air.

IN THE parking lot, Magee is sitting on the hood of my car, shoulders stooped, head down. He does not look up when I approach him, sit next to him. He is shivering. After a long moment, without looking up, he says, "He was real."

"For a while," I say. I put one arm around his shoulders, trying to give him some of my warmth.

"I didn't know." Magee turns to me, weeping without tears. I pull his head down on my shoulder, my fingers in the coarse, wiry hair that always smells of clay dust.

"Hush, shhh," I whisper. "It's O.K. Shhh." I find that I am rocking him gently: the same things comfort us at forty-five as at eleven months. As we rock, Magee's shivering gradually stops. I hold him, looking out over his head at the night sky. It is alive with stars, and somewhere up there the *Valkyrie* is making its way home to me.

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FILMS

HARLAN ELLISON'S WATCHING

Installment 44: *In Which the Good Ship Coat-Tail-Ride Sinks, Abandoning Hundreds in Treacherous Waters*

PROGNOSTICATION is not my trade. Nostradamus was a bad free-verse poet, about as accurate as gimpy frauds like astrologers Sidney Omar, Jeane Dixon, Joyce Jillson, and Nancy Reagan's own Joan Quigley. Every year the Bay Area Skeptics compile a survey of the specific predictions of "psychics" and every year those who, in January, claimed for themselves "the gift of prophecy" are shown once again to be no better at piercing the veil than the rest of us. Of the top ten news stories of 1989-90 — including the tearing down of the Berlin Wall, the collapse of Communism, the capture of Noriega, the Pete Rose and Marion Berry scandals, the failure of the Hubble Space Telescope in May, the release of Nelson Mandela, the debacle of the savings & loan system, and Iraq's invasion of Kuwait leading us to the brink of a major war — not one of these bullshit soothsayers hit with a single prediction. They missed with *anything* of consequence. And as for the San Francisco World Series earthquake, those who have claimed they "saw" it coming have been logged-in as making the predictions *after* it happened, as did you and I. (Not to mention that one of the standard "glimpses" these clowns make *every* year is that a major temblor will hit the Bay Area. The big prophecy they all subscribed to, that it was supposed to happen in 1986, was just one more in the long unrealized string of such warnings. But *not one of them* predicted it for 1989, presumably because they'd been burned so many times before, they figured they'd just omit it from the traditional "you will meet a dark stranger" and "you will go on a long journey" nonsense on the reliability

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level with fortune cookies.)

Reasonable and logical extrapolation of current trends, as practiced by keen-eyed observers like John Naismith or Roberto Vacca is about as close as any rational person would expect us to be able to plot the future. And just the development of something as underrated as the microchip or The Pill or the fax machine or AIDS can throw even *those* educated guesses into a cocked hat. Imagine what the breakthrough of fusion power will do.

No, as C.S. Lewis put it in THE SCREWTAPE LETTERS, "The future is something which everyone reaches at the rate of sixty minutes an hour, whatever he does, whoever he is." So I try to keep my trap shut on such long-term guesswork.

The one time I ventured a prediction that we would *never* have a nuclear holocaust, a theory I came to after long and sedulous analysis of history and human nature and current events, and mentioned it *en passant* on a radio show I was hosting each week, I was greeted by sufficient opprobrium that I vowed such forecasts would no longer emerge from my face, no matter how compelling the auguries.

Having sworn off public auspication, I will now demonstrate that I can't maintain a resolution any better than the rest of you, by presenting a seditious and heretical theory predicting the utter vanishment of the horror genre within two years.

As a founding member of Horror Writers of America, who has won two of the handsome Bram Stoker awards for work in the genre (one of them for the book that collects these film essays), who currently sits on HWA's Board of Trustees, I'm sure this theory will endear me to not only the membership at large, but enshrine me forever in the affections of all the paperback publishers currently shoveling out as many possessed mansion and demon child novels as they can locate. Caution to the winds.

Let me start with the word *horror.*

Look at it once more. HORR-OR!

(There is this word, which word I cannot now remember, that is the proper term I'm seeking. It's a word like *epizeuxis,* a noun that means emphatic verbal repetition; but it's a different word. And that word is the proper nomenclature for repeating something until it loses its meaning and sounds like gibberish. Like, f'rinstance, take the word *gibberish.* Start to say it, and keep at it till it is just a mouthful of glossolalia, which also isn't the word I'm hunting for.)

Horror.

HOR-ROR!

(I've noticed a linguistic tendency toward concretized thinking

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where certain groups are concerned. Take the words "science fiction" for instance. They no more reflect what is being written than "Food, Folks, and Fun" as Madison Avenue doublespeak for McDonald's reflects the muck one can purchase 'neath them Golden Arches. But there it is, that outmoded, inaccurate, hincty phrase, "science fiction," stamped onto everything from Edgar Rice Burroughs and Tolkien at one end, to Vonnegut and Stephen King at the other. It's epizeuxis to the point of glossolalia. But heaven forfend anyone suggest a better literary designation might serve individual writers better. The words "science fiction" are as sacred a cow as the shape of the Hugo, an icon long overdue for reshaping.)

Oh, the HAWR-OR of it all!

A word that has been foisted off on an entire cadre of disparate talents, for the convenience of marketing. Just the way they decided "science fiction" or (dare he speak the name) "sci-fi" has been rubberstamped, accurate or not. But just think about that word: *horror.*

It ain't terror. And it ain't suspense. And it ain't psychological thriller. And it ain't macabre. And it ain't even weird stuff. It is *horror.* Now, if you look in your dictionary — as those who permit the word to be used on their books clearly do not — you will find that *horror* is followed by such words as dreadful, abominable, extremely unpleasant, deplorable, disgusting, terrible, awful, appalling, hideous, grim, ghastly, revolting, repulsive, dire, and repellent.

In short, everything that any normal, sane human being *doesn't* want in his or her life.

For some time now, I've been *nuhdzing* Horror Writers of America to come up with a new way of identifying itself. With very little success. They seem to be as wedded to the word *horror* as forty years of demeaning press has wedded *science fiction* to a genre that deserves better.

I wonder if they would be as set in their ways if they were synonymously known as Extremely Unpleasant Writers of America. Or Hideous Writers of America. Or Ghastly, Revolting, Repulsive and Repellent Writers of America.

It wouldn't matter, I suppose, if it weren't already written in the stars that about two years down the pike, there won't *be* any horror genre for them to be Writers of. America or otherwise.

And if it isn't a message all that clear in the firmament, it has certainly been a *mene mene tekel* in the boxoffice stats for 1990. I'll get to that in a moment, but let me round out the implications, as I see them, for the genre in print.

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I think it is obvious that there is major shakeout on its way. The signs and portents are all there, if one cares to look. Half a dozen of the most popular writers in the second tier of successful "horror" writers have been told by their publishers that they don't want any more of that stuff. They've been told that if they want to see their forthcoming efforts accepted, they had better start moving away from "horror" into thriller or suspense or psychological terror. But no more of that icky crap with the oozing blood and the brain-eating zombie, neck-gnawing vampire, nameless evil from the fetid swamp, ancient curse in the possessed mansion hokey-pokey. Most of the major paperback houses have already cut their lists, or repackaged titles originally intended as horror entries so they look like something else. (Yes, I know that Dell seems to be flying in the face of this trend with a Jeanne Cavelos-edited horror line, and I can't explain that; but John Silbersack, over at NAL, has smartly opted for a "weird" or "dark fantasy" aspect to his forthcoming series. We'll see which of the two is around, in 1992.)

My instincts tell me that never before has a category of literature cannibalized itself so quickly. But then, I never thought there was much meat on this beast to begin with. All of the major themes had been handled *ad infinitum* before the horror boom ever started. Stoker and Walpole and Poe and Lovecraft and Blackwood and Mary Shelley and Shirley Jackson and even Henry James had gone at the form, and done it as well as anyone might wish. And they were only the tip of the best work available in the genre. Davis Grubb and Clark Ashton Smith and William Seabrook and Hodgson and Bierce and M.R. James and Le Fanu and Machen and Wm. Sloane and the best of us all, Fritz Leiber, had been tilling that field for a hundred years. There was little enough to work with, even for them; from the golem to smoke ghost. But what possibilities existed were explored.

Doesn't anyone ever ask why, prior to 1974, there was no deep and wide stream of American horror writing? There was never enough fecundity in the form to support a large roster of individual talents. There was the occasional Kafka or Matheson, and they found new ways of doing the demon and the witch and the creature with no face. But there were only a couple of dozen McGuffins in the genre, right from the start.

Then along came Stephen King.

Sui generis. Whether it was that the form had been waiting for him, or he had been born to be the next

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significant worker of those ancient materials . . . he was the new Poe, the latest Lovecraft, the direct lineal descendent of Polidori. With CARRIE he revivified the category, and made it his own.

And he had long coat-tails. And the kind of money he made with what he did was too great a lure to ignore. And the venal and the imitative licked their chops. And they rushed in behind him to create a market that didn't exist, to feed an audience that wasn't hungry, to dig in like fleas on a basset hound.

There never *was* a blossoming for "horror." There was only Stephen King, and everyone else.

Now, that is not to say that there weren't golden moments. SONG OF KALI comes to mind at once. But even there, considering Dan Simmons as a writer, as an individual intellect, one can clearly see that SONG OF KALI is hardly a "horror" novel. It is a novel that floats on an undercurrent of horror, of *horrific* possibilities; but it is in the traditional mode of mainstream Western Literature. It does not rely on the coarse thumpings and clotted structures of what has come to be known as the "horror" genre.

There was a rush, and the newsstands and bookstores suddenly were overrun with ham-handed amateurs, all gnawing at the meatless bones. Bucks were made, bad books were written, good writers deserted their own voices to speak in forked tongues.

And good writers were led astray by greedy publishers, by editors who should have had more spine to resist; and bad writers were dragooned to fill those publishing slots. Until they had wrung the threadbare cloth dry. And still they kept dumping their wearisome rehashes on the market. Until the audience that had never existed to begin with, turned away. Turned back to the suspense novel, the thriller, the mysteries and the psychological dramas.

That was yesterday. And this morning, if one climbed to the top of the tower, and gazed out at the horizon, one could see the shakedown coming.

When it hits full force, all those who existed merely because Stephen King dominated the landscape will find themselves homeless. Dean Koontz will remain, and Joe Lansdale; Rick McCammon and John Saul; Lisa Tuttle and Dan Simmons (if he chooses to write in that vein); Bloch, as always, and Ramsey Campbell, probably. Half a dozen others, who will retool in time, and who will survive. And all the rest will drown. They won't desert the ship . . . the ocean will dry up.

It's coming in on the wind. You can sense it. And if the Horror Writ-

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ers of America have the sense to blow off that ridiculous infatuation with the *word* "horror," they will quick as a bunny get themselves a more universal and capacious moniker. Don't ask me what that ought to be. I'm not clever enough to figure out something market-worthy and prestigious; I'm only clever enough to have perceived the problem.

A problem that was inevitable, but perhaps need not have progressed so rapidly to a terminal condition. There might have been a few extra years in the carcass, had not the need to cannibalize the form gotten so out of hand.

When a literary form begins to run out of ideas, the last stop before the abyss is the escalation of the elements, the coarsening of the themes, the amateur's belief that simply to shock is enough. And so, if we begin with the discreet shadowing of the sene as the vampire bends to the throat of his victim . . . and we move a little further into the light with each succeeding vampire story . . . then we come, at last, to the crude writing that describes in detail every spurt of blood, every diseased puncture hole, every last bit of minutiae of bodily functions, abhorrent perversion, disgusting child molestations, exploding heads, morsels for rodents, overstated and purple-prosed phobias. In short, the salting of the land.

And that is where the "horror" genre has come to a death rattle. I choose not to name the names, because some who perform in this manner are friends of mine; but you know who they are. They say they are only writing thus to "awaken" us, to "bring us in touch with our nerve-ends." What a load of horseshit.

We *live* in times that are rife with horror. One cannot open a newspaper without confronting a monstrosity greater than the one met the day before. One cannot listen to the news first thing in the morning without being lashed by the terrors that possessed the night streets through which we slept.

No one needs to be shaken by the shoulders to feel the terror of the age. If you're unfortunate enough to live in a city of almost any size, you exist with fear morning and night. Drive-by shootings that waste two-year-old kids. Joggers brained till they're comatose so some clowns can steal their Adidas. Rapacious developers and their cronies in city government who tear down the past and blight the landscape for a cheap buck. Illiteracy and alienation. Random rudeness and capricious street madness. All around you are the warning signs that if you look at someone wrong, or you happen to be at the wrong stoplight, or you pass the wrong

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alleyway . . . that you may come up short of luck, and next day's news notes you as a statistic. So you stay alert. In the cities we call it "street smarts" but what it is, simply, is being in touch with terror. And if you're unfortunate enough to live in a small town, or the countryside, the terrors you face are the petty censors and the White Supremacists, the bigots and the bullies; the dumping of industrial waste in the night, and the encroachment of the cheapest aspects of mass marketing on a bucolic way of life. The Klan and the fundamentalists, racist cops and righteous citizens who know what you should read and what movies the single theater in town should play.

And the inept writers who escalate violence and loving detail of autopsies tell us how they serve the commonweal . . . by bringing us to an awareness of the dark side of human nature. They obfuscate with that sad, sorry song about how they need to shock us to awareness.

In medicine, they only use shock treatment when the patient is insane, cataleptic, or dead.

Just as the horror genre is dead. Or insane. Or cataleptic.

The end of the road lies just ahead. The ship is sinking. The train is pulling out of the station. The fuel tank is empty and we're flying on one engine. (The nice thing about ridiculing the awful is that one can mix metaphors like veggies in a blender, and no matter how purple you get . . . you're pale blue by comparison with the crap that's actually being published.)

The foregoing has been an alert for any writer who has the taste for survival that it takes to stay in the game. Beware the Ides of March. Selah.

THE FOREGOING is the scenario for the genre as it appears in the print medium. The buttressing proofs deal with what's been going on in film this past year. The same story is told, but more clearly.

Consider the top ten boxoffice films of 1990 (beginning with the 1989 Christmas season) as clocked by *The Hollywood Reporter* in August, in descending order of gross to date:

Pretty Woman 164,142,466 in 19 weeks of release.

Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles 131, 693, 386 in 18 weeks.

The Hunt for Red October 119,973,212 in 22 weeks.

Back to the Future II 116,425, 676 in 15 weeks.

Total Recall 112,709,460 in 9 weeks.

Driving Miss Daisy 106,517,604 in 33 weeks.

Dick Tracy 101,117,485 in 7 weeks.

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Die Hard 2 95,625,666 in 4 weeks.

The War of the Roses 86,048,662 in 28 weeks.

The Little Mermaid 84,335,373 in 31 weeks.

Check the list. There are, if one stretches the category, four films of a fantastic nature, excluding *Dick Tracy*. One is an animated Disney fantasy; one is a live-action version of a fantasy cartoon series; and two are more or less science fiction.

Not one horror film in the batch.

During the week of August 5-11, there was not one lone single solitary horror film in the top *fifty* boxoffice winners. *Ghost* and *Ghost Dad* and *Arachnophobia* (about which more in a moment) were about as close as anything came to being spawn of that genre.

Now, granted that any year in which the best "serious" film is *Driving Miss Daisy*, is which snooze-inducing sequels glut the available screens, in which as sloppy a piece of work as *Presumed Innocent* (a cheat of a film if ever there was one) draws slavering praise is not a year to be enshrined in the Parthenon of Great Art, even so, one is required to ask, "Where are all the horror films?"

And answer there comes none.

The fad is ended. The stove has gone out. The camel has had his last drink. The embolism has reached the heart. The metaphors have run amuck. And of horror films there come none.

Nothing even that close to horror has been seen in a year.

The summer was a burn ward filled with ambulatory corpses. Even granting that Hollywood films during the vacation season, the school is out season, come to us from some demented Never-Never Land, produced by lost boys who don't wanna gwow up, even so, *this* summer had worse dregs than usual. And the two closest things to a proper horror film were ARACHNOPHOBIA (Hollywood Pictures/Amblin Entertainment) and DARKMAN (Universal).

The former can be dispensed with quickly. Unless one is totally unhinged when a Tegenaria, the common House Spider, runs across the kitchen floor, one will find this movie a predictable bore. At one hour and forty-three minutes of spiders springing out of every niche and cupboard, the gag gets mighty stale, mighty fast. Because that's all there is to it. Spiders jump out and occasionally bite someone, who twitches a while, then croaks wearing a hideous rictus. The tv spots kept showing John Goodman (Roseanne Barr's hubby on the sitcom) as a pest control guy, looking pretty funny. Well, that was the totality of

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his contribution to this film. He could have been excised without notice, without damaging the "plot." Goodman was a loss-leader, shoehorned into this standard oogabooga to con an audience that wouldn't otherwise pay any attention. As for the direction, though Frank Marshall has a spectacular track record as producer (*Raiders of the Lost Ark, Who Framed Roger Rabbit,* and the first *Poltergeist,* among many others), he should stick to second unit work. This is as creaky a directorial debut as anything I've seen in a decade of wretched no-talent directors, all of whom get a possessory credit before the title.

There is virtually nothing else to say about this clinker. In the '50s it would have been done on a shoestring by somebody like Babe Unger or Sam Katzman, and it would have immediately sunk to its proper level at rural drive-ins, to become one of those gawdawful cult icons ones sees lauded in *Fangoria* or one of its clones.

If there is any genuine horror passim this production, it is in the amount of money that was thrown at it, to no avail.

As for the latter, *Darkman* is the triumph of form over substance. It is *Phantom of the Opera* impregnated with pure Bronson *Death Wish* violence. Sam Raimi's direction of a five-credited writer screenplay is all snap crackle and pop, with the latest SF/X razzle-dazzle. But the story is howlingly stupid. . .

. . . f'rinstance: the McGuffin in this one is a memo that links a rapacious developer with payoffs to city officials. I suppose back in 1940 that would have worked; but we live in the real world these days; and when we see felons like Michael Milken and Ollie North and Imelda Marcos and the S&L sharks doing eight months in a slam where their biggest worry is that the Jacuzzi water ain't too tepid . . . if they do any time at all . . . well, such a memo seems pretty pale as the impetus for mass murders, blowing up laboratories, and initiating a vendetta. But even *more* imbecile is the manner in which that memo keeps turning up. The bad guy loses it at the beginning of the film (though we're not told how), and even though the killers cannot possibly know that the woman who copped the memo left it at the lab of her paramour, Dr. Peyton Westlake, they impossibly show up there, burst in with assault rifles (instead of waiting till he went out and quietly searching the place), beat the crap out of the Doc, set fire to the place for no good reason, and make more noise than a Motley Crue concert. And later, when the memo has been restored to the pos-

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session of the bad guy, does he just burn the goddam thing (and why didn't he do it in the first place?) so he'll be safe? Ah no, he *leaves it on his otherwise empty desk* so that attorney Julie Hastings — the one person he has spent the entire movie trying to wrest the memo away from — spots it . . . and swipes it *again*!

Look: *Darkman* is so slam-bang that you have no inclination to think much about it, as it's happening. But after all the lights and bomb-blasts have dimmed, and you think about it, this is another one of those cacophonous no-brainers intended as the first of a series of money-making, cynically-slanted fish-wrappings intended by Universal (once the house of horror with Frankenstein, the Wolf Man, the Mummy, Dracula, and the Creature from the Black Lagoon) to get back into the grue and guts business. It's an amusing bucket of blood and brains, I guess; and it will make its nut; but if this is the closest to a true horror film that Hollywood can give us, then I rest my case as to the demise of the form.

(And just a word about the violence level in this season's films. 16 dead in *Dick Tracy*; 12 slaughtered in *Another 48 Hrs.*; 28 or 30, as best I can calculate, in *Darkman*; 62 in *Total Recall*; you lose count near fifty in *RoboCop 2*; not to mention losing everyone on a 747 plus assorted bad guys and non-speaking cops in *Die Hard II*; and so on, and so on. Keep it up, you guys; just keep it up. And continue to wonder at the increase in random street violence. I'm *sure* there's no connection.)

As for MARTIANS GO HOME! (Taurus), Fredric Brown is no doubt whirling like a gyroscope in his grave. Avoid this one at all costs.

If you can catch the John Varley-scripted MILLENNIUM (Gladden Entertainment) on cable, do so. It got such a badrap last year when it was released briefly and then deep-sixed, that any wary filmgoer would naturally run a mile to miss it. But it isn't the turkey we were led to believe. It's hardly a perfect gem; but there is a wealth of inventiveness in it, and it is clear to see where other hands than Varley's stirred the pot. Hell, even as flawed as it is, it has more heart and merit than *Dick Tracy*, *Gremlins 2*, *Arachnophobia* and *Darkman* lumped together. You done good, Herb; don't let them tell you otherwise.

And as long as I'm mentioning it, just to satisfy your curiosity, DICK TRACY (Touchstone) was okay. No more than that, in my view. I admired Dustin Hoffman's Mumbles; I was impressed by the seven-basic-colors look of the film as captured by Production Designer Richard Sylbert, Art Director Harold

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Michelson, and Cinematographer Vittorio Storaro; and I managed to stay awake to the end.

But I suppose if we hadn't seen *Batman* last year, this would have been a knockout. The problem is . . . we did . . . so it ain't. Not from my seat, it wasn't. Everything from the egomania of Warren Beatty needing to jettison the Chester Gould art in lieu of second-rate cartooning that uses his puss instead of Tracy's classic square jaw, to the Danny Elfman score seemed to me just okay. So-so. Middlin'. No big deal.

I do think, however, that it was cheesy of Touchstone to panic in expectation that the Code censors would object to the see-through clothes Madonna wore, and rotoscope shadows onto her so no one in Utah would be offended by her nipples and the cleft of her ass.

And speaking of Danny Elfman, who created the score for *Darkman* — as well as *Beetlejuice*, *Batman* and *Tracy* — he's just about worn out his welcome. What was fresh and intriguing as background for *Beetlejuice*, and darkly compelling and heroic for *Batman*, has become, with his *Dick Tracy* and *Darkman* soundtracks, a predictable calculus of finite difference. Apparently — and I hope I'm not condeming Elfman too quickly, because his theme for *The Simpsons* is just ducky — this guy seems to have run out of his caesuras and cadenzas. What he has to say, he's said at least twice too many times already. He's the overused composer of choice this season, and he's working, which is always nice for any artist, even one I've enjoyed since he did the crazy score for his brother's flick *Forbidden Zone* (featuring the Mystic Knights of the Oingo Boingo) back in 1980; but these are meters and figures that have grown rapidly contemptible through familiarity. The most memorable legacies of *Dick Tracy*, in fact, may not be the film itself, nor its planned sequel(s), but the ancillary soundtrack albums, excluding the forgettable Elfman epodes.

If you haven't yet cupped your auricles and membrana tympani around Madonna's *I'm Breathless* (Sire/Warner Bros. Records 1-26209) and *Dick Tracy* (Sire/WB 26236-2), a collection of Andy Paley's 1930s style songs from the movie, performed by certified killers LaVern Baker, Al Jarreau, Darlene Love, k.d. lang and Take 6, Brenda Lee, Patti Austin, and the Killer himself, Jerry Lee Lewis, consider your summer misspent. Even MTV can't resist lang's "Ridin' the Rails"; and Ms. Baker belting the gutbucket double-entendres of "Slow Rollin' Mama" reminds us that it ain't a matter of censorship that consigns 2 Live Crew to musical oblivion, it's the

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paucity of their talent, their crassness and obviousness, onaccounta Ms. Baker is a hundred times steamier than the rap-rats, but not even a mook like Jesse Helms would dare to suggest that it's anything but Art, High Art!

And though I haven't heretofore been a big booster of Madonna, because denied all the amplification and razzmatazz she's got a little voice that a whisper from Ella or Billie or Bessie would blow away, but I've got to say that her way with the slick Stephen Sondheim compositions on *I'm Breathless* would set a tuffstone Easter Island statue to scatting. In the blaze of these two sets, the repetitious Elfman elevator music stands deep in a darkness that oozes over to *Darkman*. If anyone out there knows Mr. Elfman, and values the not-inconsiderable talent he clearly possesses, you might pass along these caveats and whisper a couple of names to him: John Barry and John Williams, film composers who burst blindingly, overexposed themselves, marked time in place, and burned out, the former almost forgotten, the latter Boston popped. Then speak these names louder: Alfred Newman, Nino Rota, Ennio Morricone, Bernard Hermann, Claude Bolling, Miklos Rozsa.

Do the litany strike a familiar note?

ANCILLARY MATTERS: The University of Nebraska Press (901 N. 17th, Lincoln, Nebraska 68588) has published THE STRANGE CASE OF DR. JEKYLL & MR. HYDE, illustrated by the incredible, the breathtaking, the astonishing Barry Moser, with a foreword by Joyce Carol Oates . . . It's the version based on the original 1886 edition, and the dozen wood engravings by Moser will knock you out. It's only 15 bucks, and you *must* own it!

The damnedest part about this "film critic" crapola is the frequency with which readers of the column (or the book) feel the need to come up to me and say, "I enjoy your columns . . . I don't always agree with everything you have to say . . . but I like reading them . . . even when I don't agree with everything you have to say."

Now where the hell did they (or you) ever get the demented idea that I need everyone to agree with everything I have to say in these little outings? Hell, *I* don't even agree with everything I have to say in these columns!

You show me someone who agrees with *everything* I have to say, with every lunatic theory or opinion I extrude, with every weird position I take (sometimes just to piss you off), and I'll show *you* someone who made re-entry at too steep an angle.

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As I said in the introduction to the book, everyone has a hatful of opinions about movies, no less fervently held than their absolute certainties about religion, politics, proper behavior, and the sexual proclivities of celebrities whom they've never met, but about whom they've read in supermarket tabloids. When I express my admiration for David Lynch's version of Frank Herbert's *Dune*, or my loathing of the twisted view of history in *Mississippi Burning*, I often have nose-to-nose confrontations with filmgoers who act as if I've attacked their deepest religious beliefs.

Opinions. That's all I offer, that's all I tread upon. And when someone comes up to me at a lecture, or a book-signing, and runs that ramadoola about not agreeing with everything I have to say, the best I can do is to interpret it as an attempt on the part of the speaker to prove his/her independence as buttress against their misperception that I demand slavish agreement on all points. And I am bewildered; because I seek no such thing.

This agreement thing extends to my relationship with other observers of the world of cinema. As you've read in these pages, over the years, I fancy the way of thinking of Pauline Kael and Jeffrey Lyons and David Denby and Molly Haskell . . . most of the time. You see, I enjoy their criticism . . . but I don't agree with everything they have to say . . . but I like reading them . . . even when I don't agree with everything they have to say. But if I encounter them, as I occasionally do, we never have to run that ramadoola because *it's a given*. We deal in opinions (or as Voltaire put it: "My trade is to say what I think") and so we understand that half the time we'll be at loggerheads over a specific chunk of film, even though we'll be *simpatico* as to general criteria for good or bad. I wish readers of these columns would grasp same, and refrain from telling me how independent they are.

Now if you want to read some *other* critic with whom I find myself agreeing a *lot* of the time, try a perceptive essayist name of Kathi Maio. She appears mostly in a publication called *Sojourner* (after Sojourner Truth, one of my personal idols), and she has a collection of her reviews/criticism currently available, name of FEMINIST IN THE DARK. (The Crossing Press; Freedom, California 95019; 239 pp.; $7.95 in paper, with a cloth edition available, but I don't know at what cost.)

Ms. Maio has a sharp eye, and a keen sense of rightdoing, as well as wrongdoing, when it comes to what Hollywood (and Otherwhere) gives us to mull over. She has altered my

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viewpoint more than a couple of times, and changed my heart several more oftentimes than that. She is so smart, and so clever in the ways she uses that smartness in her writing, that you will never again be able to look at *Dirty Dancing* or *Jewel of the Nile* or *Fatal Attraction* without her ingenuous voice whispering in your ear that not only isn't the emperor wearing any clothes, but that his wee-wee ain't all that spectacular, either.

And if the word "feminist" in the title of her book gets you nervous, I can allay your twitchiness only to this degree: she isn't a stuffy semiotic bore, she is a real honest-to-peaches *writer*, with wit and bemusement and passion. And I hope you will seek her out, because there aren't many film commentators as good as Maio and me around, and you'd better be nice to us or we'll abandon you to Siskel and Ebert, and *then* where'll you be?

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Elizabeth Engstrom wrote "Fogarty & Fogarty" (April 1988). She is the author of four books, most recently LIZZIE BORDEN (Tor). She lives on a sheep farm in Eugene, Oregon with her husband and son, where she is at work on her newest book, a psychological thriller set in the Oregon Cascade mountains.

Rivering

By Elizabeth Engstrom

MARGARET PULLED THE van to a rolling stop on the pebbled beach right at the inside of the river's elbow. She looked through the bug-spattered windshield and felt the weariness creep up the back of her neck.

"Let's get out and see what she looked like, Moose." She unbuckled her seat belt, let it drop to the floor with a clank, then stepped over the dog and slid open the side of the van. The beach crunched underfoot as she stretched.

Moose, an ancient collie, slowly got out of the van after her. He, too, stretched, then put his nose to the ground and began to wander.

"Don't go too far, boy," she said. "Dinner in a half hour. We can begin in the morning."

Margaret limbered up after the long drive with ten minutes of calming yoga stretches. Then, before the daylight faded away, she walked down to the river's edge, took off her tennis shoes, and waded in up to her ankles. It was a perfect location. It looked just like the type of place the slivers

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would congregate. Well, she'd find out in the morning.

She went back to the van, brought out the little cookstove, dipped water from the river, and cooked up some dehydrated stew. It wasn't great, but it was easy and it was protein. She opened a can of food for Moose, and they set to their dinner. Afterward she didn't even wash the dishes. She set them outside the van, spread her sleeping bag out on the van floor, and fell instantly asleep.

All night long she dreamed of catching slivers. All night long she dreamed of catching the right slivers. *Her* slivers.

She got up before dawn, excitement brewing in her belly as the coffee brewed on the stove. In the early hours, she'd had an important dream, and she knew that this was the place. Here she would find and catch the slivers she'd been rivering for all year. She wouldn't have to scout river after river, state after state, anymore. It was such a peaceful idea, she hoped it wasn't just wishful thinking. But she'd never felt that way before. She'd never had a dream like that before, either.

She let Moose sleep in while she did her morning exercises, facing the color of the sky. Then she breakfasted on a peanut-butter-and-honey sandwich, drank two cups of coffee, did all the dishes, and roused the dog. "C'mon, Moose," she said. "It's time to find Dad."

She twirled the combination lock on the little safe she had installed under the driver's seat, opened it, and took out the seven little leather bags, each with a long tether wrapped around it. She unwound the tether from her two and put the other five in her pocket. Then she got the net from the front seat and the little cooler with its chunk of dry ice.

Moose walked with her down to the river. She looked at the water, black in the early light. She squinted her eyes and looked downstream.

There! She saw one. The starlight caught the little flash of silver. An untrained eye might think it a minnow. Tingles ran up her spine. She took the cooler and the net upstream of the elbow. She took off her sneakers and rolled up her pant legs.

She waded into the icy water slowly, quietly. The river undercut the bank the tiniest bit, and that's where they would be. She tied the tethers to the rings she'd sewn to the legs in her jeans, then dropped the pouches into the water and watched as they flowed downstream, moving in the gentle current.

Then she stood absolutely still.

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Moose, seeming to sense the urgency, also remained motionless.

A little silver glinted in the water. She waited. It seemed to sniff the pouches, and then was off. Not the right one.

She waited until the sun came full up, until her feet were so numb from the cold that her back ached, and nothing had come for the bait. Moose had wandered away in hopes of finding a rabbit.

She brought in her two lines and set the other five out in the same way. No luck.

At noon she brought them in and stiffly walked up to the van. It was still a good place, and there were slivers here. It was just that *her* slivers didn't seem to be here.

She heated up some soup and lay down on her sleeping bag. Her bones ached from motionlessness, cold, and disappointment. She'd try again after a rest. If she didn't get *something* soon, she'd be out of money.

She opened the pouches so they could dry. In the first one was the tip of Roger's forefinger, the crucifix he always wore, and a dried bud of his favorite rosebush. She laid these things out on a tray to dry. She couldn't let them rot. In her second pouch were her father's little toe, his wedding ring, and the waterlogged and no-longer-recognizable picture of her mother he always carried in his wallet. The other pouches held similar pieces of the anatomy and significant memorabilia of the deceased. She didn't know these other people, and had nothing to do with them. She was rivering for hire. Paid to find dead people's souls, slivering about in the elbows of the rivers. And if she didn't have some luck soon . . . there would be no more customers.

She would never forget how she first heard about rivering. She was eavesdropping on her parents' conversation when they had guests over. One of them had just hired a riverer to find his mother, so he could finally, once and for all, have control over her. The discussion heated, and while the adults went into the moral issues, Margaret went deep into her own world, thinking about the life of a riverer. And the concept stayed with her, as if she had heard her calling when she heard that conversation, and she waited patiently for her time to arrive. And a year ago it had.

When everything was laid out and drying in the back window of the van, Margaret had her soup. Rivering was a lonely business. It took a lot of energy to keep her doubts from taking over. She knew from talking to other riverers that success was infrequent, but she'd feel better if she

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could just catch *one*. Discouragement was heavy sometimes. She'd been on the river, just she and Moose, for almost a year. With no luck.

When Roger died, leaving so much unfinished business behind him, she knew she would go rivering for him. When he was laid out at the funeral home, she asked for a moment alone with him, and with her penknife, sliced the tip off his forefinger. She put it in her food dehydrator, and saved the little gray curled slip of leather in her jewelry box.

When her dad died, she paid the mortician's assistant twenty bucks to cut off his little toe. And when Joey started in college on a scholarship up at Colorado State, Margaret began rivering.

It wasn't long before she was out of money. But along the way she talked with others who rivered, and it seemed like there was no end of people who wanted to recover other people's souls. So she took out a little ad, and selected five from the hundreds of replies, at one thousand dollars apiece, and now that money was almost gone, too.

That discouragement mixed with the loneliness of a riverer, and Margaret hugged the big, salty-smelling dog who lay next to her, and fought back the tears. "You stink," she said to Moose. "Tomorrow I'll give you a bath."

After a short nap, Margaret repacked the tiny pouches and went back to that same spot in the river. The old-timers always told her to listen to the messages in her dreams. She pushed her doubts back and let the truth come over her. She knew she would have success here.

She stood in the shallows with pieces of her father and her husband until she was almost blind from staring at the shining water. Then she changed, tied on the other five, and immediately there was a boiling stir.

One by one, she pulled in the pouches, very carefully, very gently. She had to know for sure which one had attracted the sliver. When only one pouch was left trailing in the current, and the sliver was still there, swimming wildly around it, she swiped with her net.

And she had it. She'd caught it!

"Look, Moose!" The dog backed away, slowly wagging his tail.

Very carefully, Margaret took the net to the shore, opened the little cooler, and turned the net over onto the ice.

The ice sizzled and smoked as the sliver and the water from the net touched it, and for a moment, Margaret worried that she'd lost it. She blew down, and she could see it, a little silver sliver, lying still as death on

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the block of ice. She put the cover back on. "I got one, Moose," she said gently, her heart pounding. She opened the pouch and emptied its contents onto the cover of the cooler. There was an unidentifiable piece of flesh — it could have been an earlobe — a swatch of black hair, and a foreign coin. Inside the leather was written the name and phone number of the person searching. Seiji Okano. Margaret put the artifacts back into the pouch, opened the cooler, picked up the sliver, and studied it. She expected it to look like a fish, but it didn't. It just looked like a little silver slip of something, two or three inches long, maybe a half-inch in diameter. No eyes, no mouth, no tail, just a little slip of silver. It was hard to believe that this was the soul of Seiji Okano's wife. She put the sliver into the pouch with the other things and put the pouch on top of the ice.

"We're on a roll now, Moose, buddy," she said, and stepped back into the water.

By dinnertime she hadn't caught anything else, but she believed wholeheartedly in her dream. This was her spot. Probably every one of the remaining six slivers to be caught were here somewhere. And she would catch them.

That night, Roger came to her in another dream.

"Margaret, I'm sorry," he said, over and over again. Her heart ached. He'd come closer, puppy-dog look on his face, hands out — and her heart would pound with fear, and she'd back away. Then he would look hurt and turn away, and she would approach him again — *please don't go; don't leave me again* — but as soon as he moved toward her — "Margaret, I'm sorry" — she would back away, fear pounding in her chest.

She woke up sweating. She hugged the dog and cried.

In the morning she remembered what the old-timers told her. "They get frightened when they know somebody is rivering for them. They seem to have no control over themselves. They're irresistibly drawn to those things of the flesh, but they don't want to be. They'll fool with your mind. Pay no attention. It's just trickery, is all it is, just trickery. Stay calm and keep rivering."

In the early morning, she caught another one, and she noticed that her little block of dry ice would last two more days at the most. Then she would have to go to town, make her phone calls, ship the slivers to their owners, and buy another block of ice.

At noon she caught Roger.

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When his sliver was safely frozen, tied inside the leather pouch, and resting with the other two on the ice inside the cooler, Margaret sat down on the beach, elbows on the knees, face in her hands. She didn't know what to do with him now that she had him.

And who said these things were their souls, anyway?

She knew what the old-timers said. They said souls were waiting for Release, a periodic occurrence when all the souls went on to their next assignment — whatever that was — all at the same time. In the meanwhile, they were stored inconspicuously and economically as little pieces of solid light in the rivers.

So if Roger was in the cooler, would he go on to his next assignment from wherever he was, or would he miss out?

She picked up the cooler, ran to the van. She threw all her camping gear in, called the dog, slammed the door shut, and went into town.

At the first pay phone, she stopped, got out her address book, and made her calls. First was to Seiji Okano.

"Mr. Okano?"

"Yes?"

"This is Margaret Whittington. The riverer. I have your sliver."

"You *do*?"

"Yes."

A long sigh on the other end. "That's wonderful."

"I'll ship it to you today. It will be packed in dry ice."

"That's fine."

She verified the address.

"Um, Mr. Okano?"

"What will you do with it?"

"Stir fry."

"*Eat* it?"

"Tell me, will that keep her from going on, I mean to the next. . . ."

Mr. Okano hung up without answering.

She called the next person. A woman.

"I have your sliver."

"Oh." She did not seem pleased.

"Don't you want it?"

"Oh yes, I guess I do."

"I can release it."

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"No! Please don't."

"I'll send it to you today, packed in dry ice."

"Fine."

"Do you mind my asking . . . what will you do with it?"

"I don't know yet. Keep it. Somehow."

"I see. Thank you."

Margaret hung up, then tended to the business of shipping the two and reicing Roger.

She stopped in a tavern for a hamburger and a beer, but the waitress wouldn't serve her.

"You're that riverer come to town, ain'tcha?"

"Yes."

"Take your business somewhere else, missy," she said, then turned her back.

Margaret felt everyone's eyes on her as she left, and tried to keep her back straight when all she wanted to do was argue with the woman. Either that, or cry.

Rivering for people's souls, it seemed, was a profession not kindly taken to in the high desert country of Oregon.

She got her burger at a McDonald's, and one for Moose, too, and a six-pack of Bud at the grocery store, then headed back to the river. She had four more to catch, and then she would retire.

That evening she caught another one, but as she tipped the net to put it onto the ice, it fell onto the beach, and before she could think, Moose grabbed it and bit it right in half.

She screamed at him, he dropped it and slunk away, and there, flopping on the ground, were two half-slivers.

She picked them up, panic welling wordlessly within her, and she watched, her horror subsiding, as the two parts grew together again in her hand. Healed. Instantly. Seamlessly. She quickly put it on the ice, then stowed it in the pouch. She took a deep breath and put the cooler out of harm's way.

That night her father approached her in a dream. She sat by his side, felt his warm hands on hers; she saw the familiar wrinkles on his face. Her heart was filled with love for this man, but when she awoke, she knew it was more trickery.

And then before noon she caught him. She set his pouch next to

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Roger's, and then, with hard-bitten determination, went back for the others. She had to finish. This was her spot; this was her job.

And she did finish. It took two more days to have them all, get them all shipped off, and then she was left with the two pouches on a shrinking block of dry ice. She sat in her van, hands gripping the steering wheel. Her job wasn't finished until they were taken care of.

What on earth was she going to do with them?

She could donate them to research. She'd heard about some robotics research being done on slivers. She could eat them. She could let them go. She could pickle them and store them on her mantel. A zillion ideas came up, but none of them was right. They had to be totally appropriate to Roger. And her dad.

She drove back to the same elbow of the river, took her beach chair out, and sat in it to watch the sunset, Moose on one side of her, the cooler on the other side. She brewed a cup of coffee and reflected on her life.

The pounding, driving force that kept her rivering all these years was gone. Her future spread before her like an open field, and she felt she could build anything there she wished. She needed only step into the picture, but to do that, she had to step over the cooler.

Something must be done with the slivers.

Roger. Roger was a jerk. He drank, he ran around with other women, he gambled and lost money they didn't have, and he paid little attention to Joey when Joey needed it the most. Through it all, Margaret never stopped loving him. She knew that deep within him, he was a good man, and the things he did were somehow beyond his control. When he was straight, he was fabulous. They had such loving times, the three of them. He loved her; he loved Joey; he just had things he needed to do. They caused her endless heartache, and when he died.... When he died of a cocaine stroke — his body dumped at the emergency entrance of a hospital by a car that sped into the night — he left her in far greater debt than she could ever imagine.

Her father bailed her out.

Her father. Lewis was exactly the opposite of Roger. Lewis was the attentive husband and father, good provider, model of perfection, a true-life "Father Knows Best." From the outside. The truth was, he was cold. He kissed her cheek, but there was no warmth. He bailed her out, but when he wrote the check, there was no sympathy, empathy, or anything, and

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her words of gratitude fell on ears of granite. He sent checks to Joey every Christmas and birthday, but when she spoke with Lewis on the phone, he somehow never asked about Joey.

Lewis hurt Margaret far more deeply than Roger ever could. And now she had control of their immortal souls.

If those slivers were indeed their souls.

And *if* anything she did had any effect on them.

But she believed it did.

She believed that those who rivered altered the course of destiny. That's why it was so hard. That's why hardly anybody did it. And those who did do it were driven. And everybody else hated them.

So what should she do with the slivers?

She opened the chest, took out the pouches. She dumped the frozen little slip from Roger's pouch and looked at it. She laid it on the ice and took her father's sliver from his pouch. It was smooth and cold and solid.

She knew what to do.

She went into the van and came out with a hammer and her cutting board.

First she smashed Roger's. With just a light tap, it shattered into hundreds of small crystalline pieces. She dusted them off into a Ziploc bag and set them back on the ice. Then she smashed her father's sliver and mixed the pieces together with Roger's in the bag.

She divided the pieces as evenly as she could, and put half in the palm of each hand. She watched as they defrosted and grew together into two seamless wholes.

"C'mon, Moose," she said, and the dog walked by her side to the edge of the river.

"Maybe they'll average themselves out," she said, and watched as the little silver slips darted out of sight.

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SCIENCE

ISAAC ASIMOV

THE ILLUSION OF MOTION

I AM A professional speaker, and one of the things I have had to do in the course of this activity of mine has been to learn how to tell jokes. (Fortunately, as in the case of writing, I had a natural aptitude for it, so I managed.)

One of the great satisfactions in telling a joke is to milk it, that is, to use its conclusion as the starting point for another comment, which, if you are lucky, gets another laugh, and, if you are very lucky, gets a bigger laugh than the first time.

This happened to me last week, when I told the following story at the Dutch Treat Club, which, as president, I routinely emcee.

"According to a possibly apocryphal story that I have heard," I said, "the great Shakespearian scholar, George Lyman Kittredge, retired from his professorial position at Harvard in the fullness of his honored old age, and finding time hanging heavy on his hands, took on the duties of teaching Shakespeare at a small women's college.

"Mrs. Kittredge served tea to some of her new friends one afternoon, and one of them said diffidently, 'Tell me, Mrs. Kittredge, does it make you nervous to have the professor in the constant company of so many attractive young women?'

"Mrs. Kittredge raised her eyebrows, and said, 'Are you implying that the professor would misbehave with one or more of them? I would have you know that the professor is too fine a gentleman to act so; too ethical, too decent, too aware of his duty to me, and, most of all — *most* of all — too old.'"

At this, there was a general laugh of satisfactory proportions from the audience, and I waited for it to die down. Then, with a look of as much pathos as I could squeeze onto my face, I said, mournfully, "Ah, yes, there was a time when I, too, laughed at that joke."

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And the hard-hearted audience laughed twice as hard at that.

Well, it strikes me now that I sometimes milk my essays in this magazine as well. I start out to write a simple essay on photography, then find I must write a second on polarization and on color photography and now I must write a third on photographs that give the illusion of motion.

What makes the illusion of motion is that the brain does not handle vision instantaneously. A pattern of light-and-color is imprinted on the retina, which transmits it to the brain. The brain hangs on to that pattern for a fraction of a second.

If, in the interval, a slight change has taken place in the scene and a second slightly different message reaches the brain, the brain handles it before the first has died out. It senses a kind of flow from the first to the second. If such slight changes continue progressively, the brain interprets the continuous flow of change as motion.

This phenomenon of "persistence of vision" was noted even in ancient times. About 130, the Greek scientist Claudius Ptolemy (100-170), working in Egypt, wrote his great summary of Greek astronomy. In the book he pointed out, in passing, that if a portion of a disk is colored, and then the disk is whirled, the entire disk seems to be colored. This is because the brain doesn't let go of the sensation before the disk has made a complete turn and supplied it again.

But, for that matter, you don't need the ancients to tell you this. You can observe it for yourself. I remember, as a child, sitting out on the stoop of a building on a hot evening, along with others who were doing the same all up and down the block. (There was no air-conditioning in those days.) In order to keep the mosquitoes off, so a fond superstition held, it was necessary to set a thin stick of citronella alight. It glowed at the tip and slowly, slowly smoldered, producing a smoke or an odor that mosquitoes were supposed to find unpleasant.

I found (as I assume everyone did) that when I moved the punk rapidly, the lighted edge made geometric figures — circles, ovals, and others. This was because the brain could not sense an individual point of light first here, then there, then further still. It blended all the points together into a curve.

Suppose, then, that there was a series of drawings, each one showing an object that changed its shape slightly and progressively. It might be a human figure, with arms and legs changing position in the fashion that they would if it were

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in motion. If these drawings are placed one on top of the other and the edges are flipped so that you see them in rapid succession, your brain blends the sensations, and the result is that the pictures yield the illusion of a human being walking.

The first person to make use of persistence of vision in some practical way was an English doctor, J.A. Paris. In 1826, he prepared a cardboard disk on one side of which he drew the trunk and branches of a tree, with no foliage. On the other side he drew foliage in the proper position, but with no trunk or branches. The cardboard disk was suspended from silk threads in such a way that if the threads were rapidly turned between thumb and forefinger, the cardboard spun even more rapidly. What you saw, then, was both sides of the card simultaneously, for one side had not faded before the other had come into view. You saw a tree complete with foliage. Paris called it a "thaumatrope," which is Greek for "wonder-turner."

Paris's device was only good as a parlor trick, to be shown now and then to the momentary amusement of an audience, but it did point the way to the production of many drawings and motion by flip. I remember reading a book on atomic physics in my teen-age years, in which borders of successive pages had drawings of electrons circling a nucleus and leaving an orbital train behind. If you flipped the pages, you could not only see the electrons moving, but you could see their orbit precessing. There were other such visions, too, and I think I spent almost as much time flipping the pages as reading the book.

Actually, Paris's device was followed by something more sophisticated than flipping pages. In 1832, a Belgian physicist, Joseph A. F. Plateau (1801-1833), prepared a cylinder with slots in the sides, so that, as it whirled, you could see through first one slot, then another in rapid succession. In fact, sight seemed a little hazy, but continuous, for the brain did not let go of the sight through one slot before the next appeared.

Inside the cylinder was another cylinder on which were drawn figures that changed progressively, and a mirror was so arranged that each figure was seen through the slot facing the viewer, one after the other. When the cylinder was spun, it seemed to the viewer that he was watching a moving object. Of course, there was only one flow of movement that was completed in one spin of the cylinder, and thereafter it repeated itself endlessly, but it was still an amazing phenomenon to those who viewed such a

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thing for the first time.

Within two years, a British mathematician, William George Horner (1786-1837), had modified the device so that a number of people could watch at the same time. He also made the cylinder of changing drawings more elaborate. He called the device the "zoetrope" (Greek for "life-turning," or "wheel of life" because motion is so closely associated with living things).

In 1853, an Austrian artillery officer, Baron F. von Uchatius (1811-1881), tried to teach parade maneuvers by use of successive drawings. He worked out a way to project the drawings on a screen, one after the other, and could show up to 30 seconds of maneuvers in this way, with a whole company of soldiers watching. Illusion of motion for 30 seconds remained a record for over forty years.

By von Uchatius' time, however, photography had come into being (see "The Invention of the Devil," November 1990). It did not take much to see that if, somehow, one could take very rapid photographs, one after the other, of a moving object, and if those photographs were shown, one after the other, with great rapidity, the illusion of motion could appear with much greater fidelity than anything that could be done with drawings.

The necessary techniques for rapid photography and rapid projection had to be developed, however, and that took half a century.

The first person to show the importance of the study of motion through photographs in an important and significant way was the British-American photographer Eadweard (sic) Muybridge (1830-1904), who had migrated to the United States to participate in the California gold rush.

In those days, no one really knew the details of how a horse ran. If you look at rocking horses, you will see the front legs extended forward and the hind legs extended backward, as though a galloping horse progressed by leaps, as a jackrabbit does. This may have come about because horses were easier to carve in this fashion, but if you look at old prints of fox hunts, you will find the horses drawn just as though they were rocking horses. Needless to say, no horse ever ran in that fashion.

Even those close observers who noticed that a galloping horse moved each leg independently could not make out the exact details of the motion because those legs were moving too rapidly.

Leland Stanford (1824-1893), who had been governor of California from 1861 to 1863, was a millionaire who bred and raced horses. He maintained that at some point in a

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horse's gallop, all four legs were off the ground. A rival horse-breeder was convinced that this could not be so, and the two wagered $25,000 (a staggering sum in those days) on their respective viewpoints. The only trouble was that there seemed to be no way of settling the bet. No amount of watching horses gallop could produce unequivocal evidence one way or the other.

In 1872, then, Stanford hired Muybridge to settle the matter. Muybridge stretched twelve strings across the race track, with one end of each string attached to a different camera ready to go. A galloping horse broke each string in succession, activating each camera in succession, and taking twelve photographs. The photographs were then examined. One of them showed all four legs of the horse off the ground and Stanford collected his $25,000.

This made it quite plain that photography was the route whereby motion could best be studied, and Muybridge spent years taking more and more photographs of moving objects at shorter intervals.

A French photographer, Etienne Jules Marey (1830-1904), was also working on the project. He and Muybridge corresponded with each other and kept each other apprised of their own progress. Marey was the first to manage to produce (with a single camera) enough photographs, closely enough spaced, to produce the illusion of motion in the same fashion that had been done with drawings for half a century. Marey accomplished the feat in 1882, and this was the fundamental beginning of what we now call "motion pictures." It was a very primitive beginning, for Marey achieved only a few seconds of motion.

What was needed now was a great many photographs, taken at very sort intervals, and developed on some transparent medium. The photographs could be developed on a long strip of such a transparent medium, and this could be passed before a rapidly flickering light which could project first one, then the next, then the next, onto a screen at sub-second intervals — one with each flicker of light.

The technique was easy to visualize, but working out the mechanics was not easy. Through the 1890s, a number of inventors sweated over the problem; and, by the end of the decade, motion pictures were in existence, but it is hard to point to any one single man and claim him as the inventor.

Most of the very early work was done in France, and the Lumiere brothers (whom I mentioned in last month's essay as the founders, later on, of color photography) improved

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the system of projection and established the speed at which photographs were flashed on the screen at 16 per second (the speed still used today). They were the first, in 1895, to project life-size examples of the photographic illusion of motion. This is perhaps the closest we can come to the invention of the motion picture as we know it now.

The Lumieres, in 1896, called the new art "cinematography," from the Greek work "kinema," meaning "movement." The word is frequently shortened to "cinema." (When I was young, I sometimes attended a local movie house called the "Kinema." When I grew older and learned the word "cinema," I assumed that the owners of the local moviehouse, being ignorant, had misspelled the word. When I grew still older, I realized the local moviehouse was completely correct, and that "cinema" is simply the Latin spelling, as distorted in pronunciation by the French soft "c".)

There are all kinds of other names for the art: "moving pictures," "motion pictures," "photoplays," though the usual term used by Americans is simply "the movies." It is also possible to call it, more or less poetically, the "silver screen," or, in memory of the flicker existing in early motion pictures, before further improvements made photographic transitions smooth, the "flicks."

In the United States, Thomas Alva Edison (1847-1931) used strips of celluloid film on which to develop photographs and was the first to place perforations at the sides so that the teeth of gears could engage them and pull the film along at an appropriate speed. He patented this in 1897, and this is the foundation of the American assumption that Edison invented the motion picture. His advance was extremely important, but the Lumieres beat him to the punch.

The earliest motion pictures produced by the pioneers of the 1890's were simply brief skits of, say, a man sneezing, or people walking. The most famous of these early bits was called "The Kiss." Produced in 1896, it merely showed a man smoothing his mustache, looking lustful, and then planting a smackeroo on a woman's lips. It undoubtedly shocked the pious and delighted everyone else.

A French cinematographer, George Meleis (1861-1938), was the first to understand that motion pictures didn't have to be realistic; that one could do tricks with the camera, slowing it or speeding it to produce motions at an unnatural rate. He also realized that by splicing film, he could make objects appear suddenly, or transform one

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thing into another. In short, he showed that motion pictures were not simply a representation of nature but were a completely new art-form in their own right. In 1902, he made the first science fiction movie, "A Trip to the Moon," in which a rocket ship is shown hitting the man in the Moon right in the eye.

Another French cinematographer, Ferdinand Zecca (1864-1947), applied Melies' trickery to the filming of chases in fast motion. We have all seen this sort of amusing thing in early comedies, and we can see it even today in the Benny Hill television show.

It always induces laughter to see the laws of nature bent. I don't know who was the first person to run a movie film backward, but it defies the second law of thermodynamics to see a broken vase reassemble itself, or to see a body swoop up from a pool, and balance, perfectly dry, on a diving board.

In the United States, there was a slow start, because Edison, a contentious individual who tried to claim as much for himself as possible, sued everyone in sight, so that advances were lost in litigation.

In 1903, however, the American cinematographer Edwin S. Porter (1870-1941), while working for Edison, was the first to use films to tell a story. The most famous example of this was "The Great Train Robbery" produced in 1903. It proved to be very popular and established movies as story-telling devices.

Soon the movies were commercialized as places were established where anyone with a coin could see a show. The admission in the United States was usually a nickel, so that the movie houses were called "nickelodeons" ("odeon" is the Greek word for "theater"). The first American nickelodeon made its appearance in Pittsburgh in 1905. Soon they existed in every large city in Europe and the United States.

Movies came of age with the American cinematographer David Wark Griffith (1875-1948). He invented virtually all the techniques that have been used in movies ever since — the closeup, the fadeout, the cross-cutting, and so on.

His most famous film was "The Birth of a Nation," produced in 1913. It was the first full-length film, and the first one that we of today would recognize as a motion picture. However, the film glorified the Ku Klux Klan and vilified Blacks. Griffith, stung by the violent criticism the picture attracted because of its bigotry, went on to produce "Intolerance" in 1916, in which he

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inveighed against bigotry. His techniques in this film were smoother than in the earlier one.

Griffith's most influential change, however, was probably unintentional, and it was the introduction of the "star system." In the early movies, the actors were not identified. However, the movies were the first art-form to reach millions of people more or less simultaneously, and there was an outpouring of interest in particular actors and demands to see more of them. It was clear that pictures would be successful not through their titles or their plots, but chiefly through the appearance of some beloved actor or actress. Emphasis, therefore, shifted from the movie itself to the "stars" that were to be found in it.

The first actor to become a star was Mary Pickford (1893-1979), who became known as "America's Sweetheart." Another was Lillian Gish (b.1896), who starred in Griffith's early movies and who is still alive today. Griffith also introduced Douglas Fairbanks (1883-1939) in 1915, and he became the first of the great swashbucklers.

In the meanwhile, a disciple of Griffith, Mack Sennett (1880-1960), was developing the slapstick comedy. He made a thousand short comedies, many featuring the "Keystone Kops," and introduced all the great comics of the period, including the greatest comic of all time (in my opinion), Charles Spencer ("Charlie") Chaplin (1889-1971). Sennett produced the first full-length comedy, "Tillie's Punctured Romance" in 1914. It starred Charlie Chaplin and Marie Dressler (1869-1934).

The first serial, produced in 1915, was "The Perils of Pauline," in which each episode ended in a cliff-hanger designed to draw the public back one week later for the next episode.

The 1920s were the golden age of the early motion pictures. Such stars as Rudolph Valentino (1895-1926), Clara Bow (1905-1965), John Gilbert (1895-1936) and Greta Garbo (1905-1990) reached new heights of adulation. Cecil Blount DeMille (1881-1959) produced "spectacles" that were more remarkable for their elaborate hokum than for quality, as in "The Ten Commandments" produced in 1923. There were great foreign films, too, including, "The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari," produced in Germany in 1919, and "Potemkin," produced in the Soviet Union in 1925.

The early movies were silent and were performed in pantomine, with occasional intrusive slides featuring short bits of dialog or editorial comment. The silent for-

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mat was an art-form in itself, with the accent on exaggerated facial expression while the camera was cleverly used for non-verbal communication.

There was, on the one hand, an almost comical artificiality about it, and yet, once you allowed for the limitations of silence, there was something refreshing about it. It did away with the endless talking of ordinary theatrical drama and encouraged the development of novel and fascinating visual techniques.

Nevertheless, the movies could not be viewed in absolute silence. That was too great a departure from our noisy world. The films came to be accompanied by someone playing the piano or the organ, who adjusted the music to the mood of the picture. (I have a friend who specializes in early movies who says that a silent picture must never be shown truly silent; that they were made with musical accompaniment in mind.)

Naturally, there were attempts to add sound to the film directly, to have the actors talk. Sound could easily be recorded by this time, since Edison had invented the phonograph in 1877. The trick was to run the film and at the same time to record and broadcast the dialog and other sound effects, keeping photography and sound in exact synchronization.

The introduction of sound into "The Jazz Singer," produced in 1927 and starring Al Jolson (1886-1950), created a sensation, even though the technique was very primitive. At almost a stroke, motion pictures became "talking pictures" or "talkies." Eventually, the sound track was impressed visually on the film itself so that there was no chance of any loss of synchronization.

By 1929, silent movies were dead, only 16 years after "The Birth of a Nation." It was the first major art-form really to die. It was a loss in its way, for the "talkies," by reverting to realism, wiped out a whole system of increasingly subtle and complex forms of visual communication.

Movies had not, however, entirely brought about the replacement of drawings that mimicked motion. It was still possible to produce "animated cartoons." These were exceedingly popular, especially with the young, for they made possible humorous fantasies that were difficult, or even impossible, with photographs. These, too, were converted to sound. The first animated cartoon with sound was "Steamboat Willie" produced by Walter Elias ("Walt") Disney (1901-1966) in 1928. This was the first cartoon to feature Mickey Mouse, who was eventually to sweep the world with a fame

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unknown to merely living individuals.

For the first forty years of motion picture history, the films, whether silent or talking, were black-and-white. The use of black-and-white developed into an art-form of its own and was used so subtly and effectively that such movies were completely satisfactory, and the absence of color was not noted. To this day when I see early talking pictures (notably the Fred Astaire/-Ginger Rogers pictures) I do not miss color at all.

Nevertheless, once color photography came into use, it was inevitable that it be applied to motion pictures, too. "Technicolor" was invented, in which three separate films in red, green, and blue were combined to produce full color on the screen. This was first used in a Disney animated cartoon, "Flowers and Trees," produced in 1932, and in a full-length picture for the first time in 1935, in "Becky Sharp," starring Miriam Hopkins (1902-1972).

The advent of color was not quite as overwhelming as the coming of sound had been. The public marvelled at the color but did not go wild with demand for it. Therefore, since the Technicolor process was extremely expensive, both for the producers and the theaters, there was no great rush to it. Black-and-white pictures continued to be made, some even to this day.

However, color systems that were cheaper than Technicolor came into use, though not with entirely happy results. When early color pictures are viewed now, those in Technicolor are as fresh and bright as the day they were printed, while other forms of color can fade and distort badly.

Movies in color came into their own only after color television appeared on the screen. Television was a great market for old movies, and since it had color, it did not wish to use black-and-white films except at 3 A.M. perhaps. Motion pictures were therefore forced to go into color to preserve their television market.

There are, of course, black-and-white classics that are well worth viewing over and over again, and there is a movement, therefore, to "colorize" them and make them suitable for television. This, however, kills the subtlety of the black-and-white and substitutes something garish and unpleasant. Many actors are fighting desperately to outlaw colorizing but I suppose they will lose. The motion picture industry carries the American preference for money over quality to an absolute extreme.

Motion pictures moved on to

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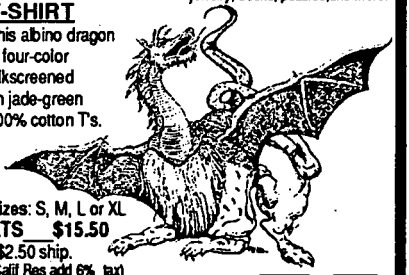
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other devices that were designed to counter the growing popularity of television in the home. They made use of a wide screen to give a feeling of amplitude to theater showings that could not be duplicated on the small screen of the television set. They expanded this to the extreme of "Cinerama," which used three separate and synchronized screens. They also introduced three-dimensional effects. These were not, on the whole, successful.

Motion pictures then permeated themselves with sex and violence on the assumption that the public would have to go to theaters to see them since they would never be shown in the sanctity of the family living room. However, these films have moved into television, too, especially since cassettes can now be bought for private viewing.

So I suppose the milking of essays must continue, for now I will have to talk about television next month.

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This is England's David Redd's first story here since "The House on Hollow Mountain," (May 1982). It's a fresh and enjoyable tale about one eventful Christmas eve on a Moonbase laboratory.

WHEN JESUS CAME TO THE MOON FOR CHRISTMAS

By David Redd

I'M SARAH BRADY. YES, *THAT* Sarah Brady. I was production manager for the Second Coming of Jesus Christ, and I can tell you it wasn't easy. Here on the Moon, of course, *nothing* is easy. And on the Moon or not, nothing involving my crazy husband could ever be easy at all.

By now, most people have seen interiors of his Warp Experiment Lab, and know what it looked like. Just a typical ordinary Moonbase laboratory, that's where Matthew worked. Gauges, monitors, power fibers and the rest. Actually, the real boss was old Professor Peabody up on her control dais, high above the giant metallic knot of toroids that she herself had designed. Beside her at the banks of instruments were the researchers: Fredric, Teresa, Krishnan, and that overgrown schoolboy, Matthew Brady,

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Ph.D. It was all *his* fault. I *know* it was.

Who else would have tried running the last warp cycle on maximum power just for a special Christmas treat?

Who else but Matthew Brady?

Oh, I know my husband! Prof Peabody won't convince me it was *her* idea, no matter what her report says about the reasons for the deliberate overload. I know what happened. I can just imagine Matthew in a white jumpsuit looking all innocent and saying, "Hey gang, we haven't had a sniff of any warping all day. Let's try for the big one!"

Then I can imagine him happily punching the controls for max, while Professor smiled like an indulgent aunt, and the rest of the Warp Gang stood by grinning to themselves.

I suppose they thought nothing could possibly go wrong.

All matter, we now know, is a flux. Could the time scale be slowed down, we would see solid things as intermittent images, a flickering of reality as sub-subatomic quanta flash in and out of existence. But what should be a formless random mist is actually an organized pattern, which we call the universe, which God in his wisdom has created out of nothingness. Here on the Moon, as on Earth, our scientific research is showing us exactly how he worked the miracle of creation. In the Warp Experiment, my Matthew was hoping to learn more about the actual techniques of creation, using magnetic containment to try squeezing the flux into some alternative form — into a new reality.

That was what Matthew and Professor Peabody and the rest were hoping to produce, here on the Moon this Christmas Eve.

It was the last experiment before the Christmas break.

I wonder what mad impulse made him call for maximum power?

Imagine the amazing scene. The transparent coils shimmering, the crackling of static electricity, the humming of the rheostats. Imagine the energies building up until the air itself glowed like a comet's tail with the eerie brightness of particle resonance.

And imagine the shape taking form within the glow. The strangely *human* shape.

But at the time I didn't know what was happening in the lab. I thought everything was under control that Christmas Eve. Unsuspecting little me breezed through the bulkhead into my makeshift studio, thinking pleas-

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ant thoughts about the spiffing broadcast I was about to produce. So as I came in, I called out a cheery greeting:

"Hi, everybody! I got held up in Atmosphere Systems, but never fear, Sarah's here! So let's get this show on the . . . this show . . . huh?"

I was talking to myself. Nobody was there. All I could see were crates stacked everywhere with the inevitable thin film of moondust over them. Not one of my production team had turned up. I groaned. This storeroom, which I'd been allotted as my studio, was still nothing more than a storeroom. Still a junkyard.

No mikes. No lighting system. No backdrop. Nothing set up.

My holovision equipment lay flopped carelessly in a corner like some drunken kiddie-TV robot, with the incredibly expensive compulink keyboard (loaned from Interplanetary Rescue) tilting precariously upon a loose tripod. Coils of obsolete cable sprawled everywhere. All in all, this looked to be the worst-prepared video studio since Ethelred the Unready made his first broadcast.

Now, how was I going to send out our little Christmas show from the Lunar Christian Fellowship to our friends at JPL Evangelical Group?

Worse still, Commander Hynam had told me that because of our special guest star from Sirius, he'd arranged a relay to all the Earth networks instead of just the Pasadena local. I'd been worrying about that all afternoon, and now. . . . Unless I could work a miracle in the next few hours, those viewers all over the world would see nothing but a heap of dusty boxes. Merry Christmas, folks, but Sarah hasn't got a show together tonight. Talk amongst yourselves until next year, all 2 billion of you.

Of course, my *real* problem was taking shape in the Warp Laboratory at that very moment — only, I didn't know it then.

I was beginning to panic about my empty studio, not realizing that far worse was to come, when I realized that the studio wasn't quite empty. One of my team was emerging from behind the crates.

He had his back to me, but I recognized the broad shoulders and crew cut of Chief Technician Abe Van Boak, slowly and deliberately sticking a glitterstar to the black metal. (I'd sprayed that wall black myself, for the broadcast. It was the only preparation I'd managed all week.)

I was so relieved to see Van that I yelled straight into his ear:

"VAN! WHERE'S EVERYBODY?"

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He froze, arm outstretched with another glitterstar. Only his head swiveled gradually toward me.

"Ah, Sarah. I did fancy I might have heard someone come in."

Then he stuck the glitterstar onto the wall, calmly, as if I hadn't nearly burst his eardrums.

"Yes, Van, it's me." I dropped my voice a decibel or two. "Where's everybody else? — Why isn't the equipment set up? — Where Roskonnor for his rehearsal?"

"For *its* rehearsal," Val corrected me. "Sirians don't have he's or she's. They have its and nuls and multis —"

"That's their problem. And who's going to interview our tentacled visitor? Where's my volunteer front man?"

"Your husband," said Van, placing another star in the black night over Bethlehem, "is working overtime at the lab. Their final Warp Experiment session is running behind. I'm sorry, Sarah, but I've no idea when he'll get here."

I groaned again. If Matt was still trying to curve space over there, Fred and Krish would be with him. No holovid operators. Which would leave only the terrible twins Lottie and Lata out of my helpers, and they weren't here, either. We committed Christians were a minority on the Moon, so our Christmas broadcast was a voluntary effort. Not a professional among us.

I did a community-affairs presentation about my hometown Christian Action branch once. That made me the media expert on Moonbase, now that the place had been set up long enough for all the reporters to leave. The expert! Some expert! While the show had been a private one for our Pasadena link-neighbors, that hadn't mattered, but now that our commander had sold our transmission rights for a mess of publicity pottage....

A real professional, I supposed, would have known exactly what she ought to be doing. I didn't know, so I made up for it by shouting.

"VAN! THIS IS GETTING DESPERATE! *WHERE'S ROSKONNOR?*"

Van retreated a step. He rubbed his ear.

"He's wrapping his tentacles around a bulb of tea with Commander Hynam, Sarah. They are indulging in more Earth-Sirian diplomacy."

"Aagh!" I clapped my hand to my head. "This is no time for diplomacy! We need that stupid Sirian right here for the Christmas show, or it'll be ruined!"

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Van gave me a confident smile. "It'll be all right on the night."

"But this *is* the night!"

I let myself collapse onto the nearest crate.

"Relax, Sarah," said Van, laying down his glitterstars. "I steered Lottie and Lata toward the commander's office. They will make sure Roskonnor comes here instead of wasting time on the Earth-Sirius peace treaty."

"I just hope they can drag him along," I said. "That alien's got to get his priorities right."

I drummed my fingers on my knees and tried to take stock of my predicament.

Roskonnor, the emissary from Sirius, was due to make the first public broadcast from a Sirian to Earth from my studio. I hadn't realized what I was starting when I suggested he guest on our show. Even though he'd refused to make any official speech until the Earth ambassadors arrived in person on the next shuttle, he'd liked the idea of joining in an unofficial Christmas broadcast. It would have been a nice surprise for our friends at JPL. Unfortunately, I'd mentioned my idea to Commander Hynam earlier today, and he'd promptly got on the link to Earth. Now I had 2 billion potential viewers, except that my Sirian hadn't arrived, and I didn't have a studio to put him in. If Roskonnor didn't go on the air tonight, nobody on Earth would ever trust a Sirian again.

Actually, my studio wasn't so bad. I could probably fling something together in here soon enough. What I really needed was my team.

My star interviewer would be Matthew. He would pick up his guitar and sing "Raise Your Eyes to the Lord This Christmas." Then Roskonnor would slurp in wearing his Santa Claus suit, and Matt would ask some nice, harmless questions so that Roskonnor could seem like a real friendly guy-next-door (except for the tentacles and slime). But Matthew wasn't here yet.

Fredric and Krishnan, my amateur holovid ops, were at the Warp Experiment with Matt. They weren't here yet, either.

Lottie and Lata should have been tackling makeup and costume, trying to make Roskonnor's pseudopods look cute and cuddly. But *they* weren't here yet.

Van was here.

I was here.

A pile of crates were here. So was the holovid gear, unassembled.

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All I could do was sort out the studio, and see if anything went right after that. I got up.

"Van! You've given Bethlehem enough stars. Get rid of these crates —help me make some room."

"But I haven't put on the big star for the Wise Men to stand under yet!"

I felt another groan coming on, but I managed to suppress it.

"All right, Van. Put up the last star, *then* take out the crates."

I had the feeling, even as I said it, that I'd missed something vital. Sure enough, Van started to lift a couple of boxes, then put them down again and turned back to me with a puzzled expression.

"Er . . .pardon me, Sarah, but where on Earth, I mean where on the Moon, can I put these boxes?"

I realized that Van had a point. This was Moonbase. Underfunded as usual, especially since the latest cut in the British/Euro appropriation, we simply had no spare space to put anything. As our chief technician, Abe Van Boak was our greatest expert on Moonbase. If he said we had no space, we had no space.

Of course, he meant designated storage space. That was the way a technician's mind worked. It was time for some feminine lateral thinking.

"Look, Van, you don't need to sleep until this is all over, do you?" (Even if he *did* need to sleep, he wasn't going to. I'd see to that.) "So you just shift these crates into our living quarters. Mine, yours, Lottie's . . . that'll get rid of most of them."

"Not all these!" (Half the store was full to the ceiling.)

"Near enough, Van. What's left we'll cover with dust sheets and arrange like scenery. You get moving, Van. I'll start the holo programs."

Giving him the manual work wasn't sexist, just practical. I was familiar with the Christmas program cards, and he wasn't. Besides, things weighed less on the Moon. He nodded resignedly and lifted the first boxes again.

I went over to the tangle of equipment and extracted the compulink. It was still working, to my surprise. I accepted the small mercy gratefully, accessed the image, and began keying in a manger scene. All done with prompt cards, of course. How else could a busy producer set up scenery and extras?

For the Three Wise Men, I read, *call up body block A with limbs B to E (basic) and head FM. Expand as required, and mouse in costume T prior to engaging attitude set. Repeat with costumes U and V. . . .*

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My pencil glowed as I scanned the microdots beside the prompt labels. A child could have done it. These precoded cards took all the fun out of imaging, but I didn't have time to be artistic. With practically my entire production team still missing, the Christmas Imaging Cards (American Midwest Series — Suitable for Home, Church and Sunday School) were a godsend. I now had less than five hours to prepare the Moon's first live Christmas broadcast. I would need every minute.

Meanwhile, in the Warp Experiment Lab, my crazy husband was about to change the course of history.

But in my storeroom, my studio, Van and I went on working frantically. My holo displays for the Christmas broadcast were inputted, tested, and stored. I had to rush the work because once the rehearsals began, I would be too busy to program anything but the teleprompt projector. (Roskonnor had written his own prompts, but the WP had kept rejecting the Sirian ideograph, and so he'd painted them onto large squares of card. Really primitive.) Anyway, I got everything sequenced somehow. I was barely aware of Van hauling away the crates, but he did heroic work shifting them into unsuspecting souls' bedrooms. At last he finished the transporting. I finished the programming. We stopped and stared at each other, realizing we'd got somewhere. I thought, If it all goes this smoothly, we've got a show.

It didn't go smoothly. My husband walked in.

He was still in his white jumpsuit, still wearing his tinted antiglare goggles. He came toward me and clapped his hands together in excitement.

"Sarah! Darling! I've seen Jesus!"

I do love my husband. That's why I don't roast his head off when there's a witness. Not often.

"Matthew sweetheart, there's no need to go into your testimony until the show starts. Wait until Roskonnor—"

He interrupted me, something he *never* does. I was so shocked I let him.

"Sarah! You don't understand. I really have met Jesus and talked to him. Our Savior has returned to mankind! *Jesus is here on the Moon — now!*"

SWIFTLY, MATT explained.

The Warp Experiment had come good at last. The Peabody force fields, set at maximum power through some end-of-term prank, had imposed an ovid pattern upon the flux. The shape had persisted for approximately 3.75 seconds. That was an incredibly long

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time by normal experimental standards, and it was certainly long enough for Jesus.

He appeared out of the flux.

They all saw him. Jesus Christ stepped through, from *his* reality into *our* reality.

Matthew recognized him at once. Jesus looked exactly the way he had been portrayed over the centuries, as I saw for myself later. Dark of hair and face, bearded, in robes of purest white, with an expression of the utmost saintliness about his lips and eyes. Some of the particle-resonance glow still shone around his head.

He spoke.

"You know me," he said.

They knew him, and they understood him. Matthew told me afterward that he had never really believed in the gift of tongues until then. The figure before them was indeed Jesus Christ, recalled to existence after two thousand years, Our Savior in white standing beside the metal toroids within a laboratory dome a quarter of a million miles from Earth.

"Peace be unto you," said Jesus, and they felt peace.

No one doubted who he was.

Even the non-Christians were convinced. Teresa, Professor Peabody . . . they saw him and believed.

Jesus told them he had come to speak again to mankind. This was the chosen time when a new age would begin. And he had come to the Moon, he said, because the people of scientific times required proof of all things. The monitors of the Warp Experiment would provide that proof. Moonbase had recorded the coming of Jesus so thoroughly that nobody on Earth could possibly doubt it.

"And now," said Jesus, "I must be alone with my Father for a time. I shall venture into the wilderness."

They saw him turn and walk slowly to the wall. Only then did Matthew realize, he told me, what the Savior had meant by "wilderness." Matthew knew with sudden certainty that Jesus was going to walk *through* the dome wall out to the bleakest wilderness ever known — the hard vacuum of the lunar surface.

'Wait!" Matthew shouted. "There's no air out there! You'll die!"

Jesus paused and said slowly and carefully, "Friend, I have passed beyond death. I shall meet with you again, very soon."

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"Hi, Sarah baby," said the Sirian. "Don't I make a terrific Santa Claus?"

Then he melted through the wall and was gone.

Matthew rushed to the nearest port, removed the opaqueness, and looked through. Out there, on the dusty crater floor, a figure in white was striding away. Without a helmet. . . .

"That's how it was," Matthew finished explaining to me, as I sat listening in the storeroom. He told me again in case I hadn't got the message. "Sarah, I saw Jesus come to us. He's here. On the Moon, with us."

Van said, "It sounds beyond belief. How could even Jesus walk through a wall?"

"He's done it before," said Matthew. "John 20, verse 26. Probably he shifted phase with respect to the flux."

"I'm *sure* you're right," I said. I reached out for Matthew, took his hand, and patted it. "Jesus *must* be here. *I* believe you, darling."

My faith was strong. I knew in my heart that Matthew had seen the risen Christ.

My head seemed to swim with a strange dizziness. I felt a surge of delight and of humility, knowing that I was one of the generation chosen to witness his return. For two thousand years, people had lived and died in the faith that Jesus had come to redeem them, and now the faith that had been handed down through all those generations was about to receive the supreme fulfillment. Jesus was here!

With difficulty, I refocused my eyes and became aware of my surroundings. This was a storeroom on the Moon, still with several crates that the imager would disguise as a snowy hillside. The walls were painted black and painted with glitterstars to represent the first Christmas Eve, in Bethlehem long ago. Nearer at hand, my holovid equipment and the imager stood ready like giant robot insects. The real Bethlehem had seen nothing like it.

"I wonder," I said, "what Jesus will make of all this."

Before Matthew or Van could reply, the door opened. A nest of green tentacles floated inexorably toward me, fringed by a scarlet and white Father Christmas outfit. A pseudomouth emerged from within the robes, and palpitated greenly at me.

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"Hi, Sarah baby," said Roskonnor the Sirian. "Don't I make a terrific Santa Claus?"

Half an hour later, my whole production team was gathered in my studio for the crisis meeting.

"Of course, let Jesus and Roskonnor meet we cannot!"

"Why not, Lottie?"

"How would he like to see an alien in our midst? He came to Earth men to redeem, not Sirians to save!"

Lottie had a good point, I thought. Where in the Bible did it mention Sirians?

Matthew thought of another reason.

"How would Jesus react to anyone dressed as Santa Claus, alien or not? Father Christmas is basically pagan, you know. Would Jesus approve?"

"He certainly would not," said Lata primly. She had leanings toward fundamentalism, and regarded most Christmas customs as heresy or worse.

Fred saw the bright side of it all. "Don't worry, Lata; at least he's up here on the Moon. He won't see what a commercial jamboree Christmas is on Earth these days."

"Perhaps he *has* seen it," I suggested. "Our Lord *is* omnipotent, after all. If Sirians can watch Earth TV, so can God."

No wonder he had sent his son back to save us, I mused, if he had been watching satellite television all these years. Then I took hold of myself and warned my team to consider our present situation very seriously. They all thought hard for a few minutes.

Roskonner wasn't present, of course. I'd persuaded him to go off to his Sirian-atmosphere bubble and research the Earthlings' ideal Christmas by watching the Neiman-Marcus Dial-A-Gift Hour. That ought to keep him safely hidden for a while. Roskonnor didn't know about Jesus appearing on the Moon. However, he *had* learned enough about our culture from old TV broadcasts to be familiar with our worship of Jesus. So, if Jesus and Roskonnor met, they would both realize that *this* Christmas Eve was not what either of them would have expected. I groaned to myself and considered canceling the whole show. Even if I had to apologize individually to each viewer, to all 2 billion of them. . . .

"No, Sarah," said Krishnan. "You cannot cancel. Interstellar relations

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between the Solar System and Sirius would never recover. The Sirian Empire is waiting for Roskonnor's report. Earth is waiting for Roskonnor's broadcast. What will happen if you cancel? Roskonnor will deliver an unfavorable report, and Sirians will despise Earthlings. Worse, our people will never trust Sirians or Moonbase engineers again. You've no choice, Sarah. You've got to do the show!"

"Krish, couldn't you have said, *We've* got to do the show?"

I could see that if anyone went to the chopping block for this fiasco, my head would be the first to roll.

So, as Krishnan had said, I had no choice. I had to do the show, and somehow keep Savior and Sirian apart. But Matthew was going to do the interview with Roskonnor, and Jesus had said very clearly that he would meet with Matthew again soon —

— very soon —

So how *was* I going to keep them apart?

The one I felt sorry for, afterward, was Commander Hynam. The news about Jesus had spread all through Moonbase, the way anything unofficial does. Within about fourteen minutes, everybody awake knew that Jesus had appeared on the Moon — everybody except Commander Hynam, of course. He learned about Jesus a little later. (One other strange thing was that nobody thought to inform Earth, either; the reason for this communal lapse of memory became apparent soon enough, being part of his plan.)

Shortly after Jesus went outside, the radiation counter showed a solar surge building up. Commander Hynam's subsequent activities were recorded automatically for the base Incident Log. He did the usual safety checks on screens and vehicles — by remote readout — and made sure the door automatics would keep everybody in until the radiation surge passed. He also did a thirty-second visual scan on the outside monitors, checking the dusty paths between domes and equipment to make sure that nobody was caught outside.

This time he saw someone.

From the recordings I've seen, the commander's first view of Jesus must have been rather faint and long-distance. And, of course, he didn't know *whom* he was seeing.

"Morgan, there's a man outside! Get him in!"

"Outside, sir? Oh, there! But —"

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Skipper Daniel Morgan, shuttle pilot and duty safety officer, knew all about Jesus. He might have some doubts about his divinity, but he certainly admitted that Jesus was here and he was someone pretty remarkable. I expect he was right beside Commander Hynam, looking at the outside monitor screen, seeing Jesus out on the crater floor, meditating in his white robes. Without a helmet. . . .

Morgan knew what he was seeing, but Hynam didn't. The commander shouted further orders:

"Stop dithering, Morgan! Get that man in — his suit won't protect him much longer!"

"Uh, sir, he's not wearing a suit. Doesn't need one."

"What? If he's in one of those experimental ultrathin membranes, it won't protect him at all. Zoom the focus closer! And pull him in before he gets killed!"

"He's not likely to be killed, sir. Not him."

(Listening to the recording, I can tell what was going through poor old Morgan's mind. How to break the news gently at this stage without sounding completely potty? Give Morgan his due; he was hinting well. A pity the commander wasn't listening properly.)

"Not likely to be killed? Of course he is, the idiot! Ah, here comes the close focus at last. Good God! No suit! No helmet! No membrane! The chap must be dead!"

"He was, sir, but that was a long time ago."

"Morgan, what blithering nonsense are you spouting now — Wait! This is incredible! He's standing up! He's walking! Morgan, *who is that man out there?*"

"Jesus Christ," said Morgan.

That was how Hynam learned that his orderly, scientific Moonbase had been joined by the resurrected Messiah. I think he simply stood there and watched Jesus walking back toward the dome. I wonder what the commander was thinking.

Moonbase Standard Regulations didn't cover this situation.

My own strategy was simple. Get the studio ready, then tackle each new crisis as it came. So while Matthew went off to Dome Four to start rehearsals with Roskonnor, along with Lottie and Lata, the rest of us got to work on the storeroom. Me, Van, Fred, Krish. Setting up lights, fixing

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cameras, trying out effects and angles. We tripped up over cables and over each other. My comments were neither ladylike nor suitable for a Christmas show, but at last I saw the studio was taking shape.

Leaving the team to do the last finishing touches, I hurried along to Dome Four to attend to my biggest problem.

My Santa Claus.

Roskonnor.

Virtually the entire volume of Dome Four had been converted into a Sirian-studies center, with a high-pressure bubble for Roskonnor to relax in, and a special interview room in standard atmosphere where our experts would question him. (No wonder Moonbase was so short of space these days.) Matthew had put him in the interview seat. Roskonnor lolled nonchalantly, tentacles draped everywhere, while Matthew hunched on a draftsman's stool and looked glum. Evidently, I had arrived during a break for costuming.

Lata whispered to me urgently as I came in, "Sarah, do something! The rehearsals were dreadful!"

So was her makeup work. She'd given everybody bright rosy-red cheeks, even Roskonnor, although in his case the "cheeks" were merely odd bulges in his upper regions. I decided to be diplomatic for once and say nothing.

As for my alien Father Christmas —

Roskonnor had learned his Earth language from ancient TV broadcasts. Unfortunately, he had also learned his social attitudes from them. I could never distinguish his genuine nonhuman reactions from his Hollywood B-picture acting.

"But Lottie, honey chile," he was drawling, "the Santa jacket doesn't need the white ermine belt. It's not really *me*, sweetie!"

I sympathized with him. The Santa suit had been designed for a tubby biped, not a tentacled amoeboid.

"The belt, it is very good," continued Lottie gamely. "It gives the interest and continuity to your waist, yes?"

"Sirian waists ain't slim, baby. Take it easy! I got some delicate little pseudopods under here, see —"

"Please to keep your pseudopods to yourself, Mr. Sirian!"

Lottie's phrasing had become erratic under the stress, I noticed, or perhaps the B-movie dialogue was catching. I was grateful that our Savior

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wasn't watching this calamitous performance. Fortunately, while Lottie was fussing around with that idiotic belt, my husband was pressing on with trying to rehearse the interview.

"So, Mr. Roskonnor, back in your home system now, what was your Sirian equivalent of Christmas?"

Roskonnor swiveled slimily toward Lata, who held up a giant prompt card covered in obscene-looking squiggles.

"Oh, we have many festivals, Mr. Brady," Roskonnor said carefully, reading his squiggles. "At the year-end Single Sun Day, all the little nuls dress up in *F'shang* costumes, so small and sweet!"

I couldn't imagine Roskonnor ever being small and sweet. He resembled a dozen green snakes grafted onto a giant lump of snot. Making him photogenic was an uphill task. Lottie abandoned the belt for a while and tried fitting a large red hood over his head. As he didn't have a head, only a rather variable upper lobe, she was having trouble with the hood. I could see it wasn't going to work.

"We exchange our Second Sun gifts," Roskonnor continued, "and we give *glumph!*"

The hood suddenly slipped down and all but disappeared into one of his many disgusting-looking orifices.

"Glumph?" repeated Matthew, clearly puzzled. I saw enlightenment enter his eyes as Lottie pulled out the hood and started wiping it down.

"Mr. Sirian," said Lottie sternly, "can you not some protoplasm upward make flow?"

Matthew caught my eye. His hands were making throttling motions.

"Matt, a little bit more work on it," I called, "and the show'll be great!" I backed away.

Lata poked me in the ribs. "Sarah! They're nowhere near ready! Aren't you going to *do* anything?"

I shook my head. "I think I'll cry."

But at least, I muttered to myself, it couldn't get any worse.

My wristphone buzzed.

"Jesus is here," came Van's voice. "Sarah, he wants to see Matthew!"

It *had* got worse.

It was almost as though God had overheard me and decided to test me. Now, how was I going to keep our Savior away from Roskonnor?

I whispered back into the wristphone, "Stall him. I'll be right back."

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As I cut the link, I realized what I'd said. The *Savior* of the *World* had come to redeem all mankind. What had Sarah said? *Stall him. . . .*

I made encouraging noises to Matthew and Roskonnor and told them to keep rehearsing. They were doing well, I lied. Lata faced me with a dark frown. "Sarah! *Do* something!"

I shrugged. "Let me know when you've got the boots on over his protoplasm." Then I ran for the corridor.

Meanwhile, as I was about to discover, Fred had put an armchair into our makeshift studio. He thought it would look traditional and reassuring to the viewers if Roskonnor sat in it, even thought the chair wasn't particularly well suited to Roskonnor's natural shape, whatever that was. The armchair in itself was very nice. The only snag was that it belonged to Commander Hynam, and the commander didn't know yet that he'd loaned the chair to us. Neither did I, not until it was too late.

All I knew, when I got back to the studio, was that in the middle of my set was an armchair, and sitting in that armchair was Jesus Christ.

He was calm, still dressed all in white, with a face full of infinite wisdom and compassion. In spite of all my panic and my running around, the moment I saw him, I felt a marvelous inner peace spread through me. The chaos of the past hour receded. There was just Jesus.

I fell to my knees. "Lord," I said.

He let me kneel there for a long, timeless moment. I felt that the whole Moon was his throne as he sat above me.

"Arise, child," he said.

Child? Normally, I don't allow men to talk down to me, but — well, Jesus *was* two thousand years older than I. And I suppose we were all as children to him. I did as he said, and arose.

Standing before Jesus, I felt a tranquil inner serenity. No worries. No problems. Just the certainty that Jesus was here, and his love was all around me.

But I became aware that my team felt no inner serenity. In fact, they looked positively strained. Krish had an air of stiff nonchalance, which was body language for, *I'm terrified and I wanna go home!* Fred was holding up his hands and forming imaginary camera angles around Jesus. Van seemed all right, except that his lips were moving, and I could lip-read. He was mouthing, "Sarah! Help! Sarah! Help!" over and over again.

And suddenly I remembered Roskonnor, old tentacles-and-slime him-

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self, ready to come in here and play Father Christmas, right in here where Jesus Christ our Risen Savior had returned to redeem mankind.

I felt my inner serenity fading away rather swiftly.

Especially when I recognized the chair that Jesus was sitting on. The *armchair*. The only armchair on the Moon. . . .

Then, as I began to feel that old familiar panic, Jesus began telling me what he wanted to do next. He knew he was in a holovid studio. And:

He wanted to make a broadcast. To Earth. Tonight.

"I am here," said Jesus, "to bring my message anew to all of mankind."

I gulped. "Why me, Lord — I mean, why choose this place, on the Moon?"

His face was calm and infinitely wise as he replied.

"The present age is a scientific age, my child. Humanity requires full scientific proof of my coming. Here on the Moon, your scientists can provide that proof. They witnessed my coming—"

So it *was* all Matthew's fault! My husband had been running his last big bash at the Warp Experiment with all the instruments running, of course. The death of Jesus had been one of the best-documented deaths in history; his return to life was now even better documented, thanks to the Warp Gang's banks of monitors. I remembered Matt telling me this before, the rat. I was greatly tempted to tell everyone what I thought of my absent husband, but it didn't seem very appropriate in front of the Savior of Mankind.

Jesus went on, "My new friend Matthew Brady—" (Oh, how glad I was that I'd resisted that temptation!) "—assured me that he would come here. His assistance is essential to my broadcast. Where is he?"

I gazed hopefully around my makeshift studio, but Matthew didn't materialize. Van just went on mouthing at me, "Sarah! *Do* something!" He was as bad as Lata, and about as much use. Clearly, any explanations were the job of the producer on this show. So I opened my mouth and hoped something sensible would come out.

"Oh, Matthew's a bit busy today," I heard myself say, doing my best to look sweet and innocent. "He'll be along the minute he can." I cringed inwardly and waited for Jesus to begin the third degree.

"Let him come soon," said Jesus mildly. "I will wait here, while you make your technical preparations."

I could hardly believe it. Was Jesus setting me up?

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I realized that God might be omnipotent, but his Son — being in human form — was not. Jesus was supremely wise, yes, but as regards the here and now, he knew only what God had chosen to tell him, during their communion outside on the crater floor. Evidently, God hadn't bothered to mention that two domes away, a green-tentacled Sirian was being costumed as a pagan nature spirit whose attributes had been grafted onto a Christian saint to assist the rise of modern capitalism. Or perhaps God had thought the explanation would be too complicated. Whatever the reason, I did have a chance to keep Roskonnor and Jesus apart.

"Of course, we must prepare for your broadcast right away," I said brightly. "It will be the most important event in human history for the past two thousand years."

It certainly would, I thought to myself. Jesus had to speak to the world, no question about that. The only snag was, his broadcast would hold up Roskonnor's show, and we were rather keen to stay on good terms with the Sirian Empire, especially since Roskonnor had often explained Sirian prowess at vaporizing comets, pulverizing planets, and so forth. It would be a little pointless converting the entire planet to a true Christian faith if our planet should be immediately disintegrated by Sirians avenging any insult to Roskonnor. So I had to keep my options open.

"Van, helpful team member!" I called. "Van, could you show Jesus to an empty rehearsal room, please?"

"There isn't one," said Van.

What helpful team members I had. I would deal with them all later.

"Try your own room, Van."

"It's full of boxes."

I remembered the struggle we'd had to clear this store. I shrugged.

"Well, use my room."

"That's full too. Everywhere is."

My next move was to count slowly from one to ten. Then I turned back to Jesus and hoped he was still understanding of human frailty.

"Excuse us a moment, Lord. We're a bit crowded since the budget cuts. I'll just have a quiet conference with my team members here —"

Thump! Thump!

I saw the door burst open. Commander Hynam charged in. I had an awful feeling things weren't going to get any simpler.

"Commander, how nice to see you —"

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"Mrs. Brady! I've heard the news about Jesus!"

And he hadn't taken it well, judging by his purple expression. But before I could say any more, he saw the seated figure of Jesus. His eyes widened. Give the commander his due; he switched tactics instantly and gave a perfect formal bow toward Jesus.

"Sir, welcome to Moonbase. We're all deeply honored to have you aboard. Your broadcast to Earth tonight, sir, is going to be the greatest event in history—"

I shook my head dazedly. Commander Hynam shouldn't have known about that yet. His next sentence explained it all.

"We have an interplanetary link set up about to open, sir, and we'd be doubly honored if you would consent to use it to speak to the world—"

The commander broke off. I realized he had seen what Jesus was seated upon. Fortunately, years of government service had left me well used to dealing with similar situations.

"Your armchair, sir," I said, and added loudly, "I knew you would want Jesus to have the best!"

OUTSIDE, IN the relative peace of the corridor, I patched in a call to Matthew.

"Sweetheart, is everything nearly ready with you and Roskonnor?"

"Just about, darling." He sounded tense. I didn't have a vision link, but I could hear odd background gurgles. Sort of "Ho! Ho! (squelch) Goodwill to All Men! Ho! Ho! Ho!" (squelch). Yes, they must be nearly ready. Now it was crossed-fingers time.

"Matthew, you know you-know-who is here and wants to broadcast, too? You do now! Well, here's a little idea. Could you vid your Christmas special with Roskonnor right there, not here? We can mix in our backgrounds and images no bother, if you think it's on."

"What have we got to lose?"

Just one planet. *Our* planet.

"Keep Roskonnor happy, Matt. I'll send over Fred and his gear."

"Ho! Ho! (gurgle) Ho!"

I went back into my little studio. How easy things had seemed only a few hours ago, when Van was sticking stars on the wall, and I was setting

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up the imager. Now Commander Hynam was here, deep in conversation with Jesus. Their plans for the broadcast sounded good. I hoped I'd be able to send it out without offending either Jesus or the Sirian visitor. Upset Jesus, and there'd be no salvation for mankind. Upset Roskonnor, and his planet-zapping buddies would drop by. All I could do was set up the two transmission centers and search for some way to juggle the timings.

Both Roskonnor and Jesus wanted to broadcast at midnight.

I'd said yes to both of them.

Fred went off, supposedly to check the transmission links. Modify rather than check, actually. He would modify some data circuits to carry Roskonnor's show; we'd lose some real-time moonquake monitoring, but that was a small price to pay for saving Planet Earth. *If* we saved it. Jesus, meanwhile, was rehearsing his speech. It was more than a speech; it was a testimony of faith and a call to join him. His message about putting your trust in God was so inspiring that I fell to my knees, determined to do exactly as he said. I found myself praying.

"Dear Jesus," I whispered, "I do trust you. Please help me sort this out, Lord. I know you will."

And he heard me. He answered me.

I opened my eyes into the calmness of my little studio. Everything would be all right. Jesus had said so. I had put my trust in him.

But then the door crashed open. Thud! Before me, I saw a wobbling green and red shape, a blur of writhing tentacles in scarlet robes.

"Sarah baby!" yelped Roskonnor. "I'm ready for the show!"

Yes. This was our Sirian. His tentacles swung a large Santa sack (like a pagan horn of plenty). He carried crackers and toys (commercial exploitation). To his upper protoplasm was wired a sprig of plastic mistletoe (Druidism). This was the very sight I hadn't wanted Jesus to see. Why hadn't Matthew kept him away? Where *was* Matthew?

Jesus and the Sirian stared at each other.

All I could do was make the introductions and wait for the end of the world.

"Lord" — I swallowed nervously — "this is Roskonnor. Ah, Roskonnor, this is Jesus Christ."

A tentacle tip wiggled at me.

"We've met," said Roskonnor.

Jesus merely gave a slow, saintly smile, and nodded.

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While I stood there gasping at the two of them, my husband arrived at last. He didn't look at all worried.

"Sorry I couldn't warn you, Sarah. We didn't have all the details worked out until now."

I had a sudden sense that vast plots had been taking shape around me. Details? I glanced around to reassure myself that I was still where I thought I was. Yes, this was still my studio. Van, Krish, Commander Hynam all here. Matthew here. And squeezing in behind him, Fred and Lottie and Lata. The holovid equipment was still set up. The glitterstars still sparkled in the black sky of Bethlehem. Jesus in his white robes was still enthroned on Commander Hynam's best armchair, gazing in a friendly manner at the Sirian in his Santa suit, and nobody seemed in the least bit surprised.

Jesus said to Roskonnor, "You will give the first message. Then I myself will speak."

Roskonnor made a bobbing motion that I knew meant he agreed.

"Yes, Son of God. I will introduce you well." His Sirian vocalizing seemed oddly deeper, less Hollywood, more mature.

I found my own voice at last.

"You . . . you *know!*"

"I know of God," said Roskonnor. "There is only one Maker of the Universe, Sarah. He comes to you in human form because you are human, just as he comes to us in our form. We are all less than perfect, and we need his guidance."

This was a new, serious Roskonnor speaking. I wasn't used to this.

"Now I must speak to mankind," said Jesus. "Roskonnor will help me."

"Oh," I said inadequately. If I'd known a few hours ago what was going to happen, I think I'd have gone mad. I began to perceive that this whole set of circumstances had been contrived to reach just this point . . . contrived by a higher power. . . .

"I'll help," I said, "in any way I can."

"You are helping now," said Jesus. "A caring Christian life such as yours is the greatest help anyone can give. Now, begin the broadcast. Mankind has met a nonhuman intelligent race for the first time, and my message is needed. Begin!"

I saw now that my frantic scheming had all been necessary to our Savior's purpose. My panic, the Warp Experiment, perhaps Moonbase it-

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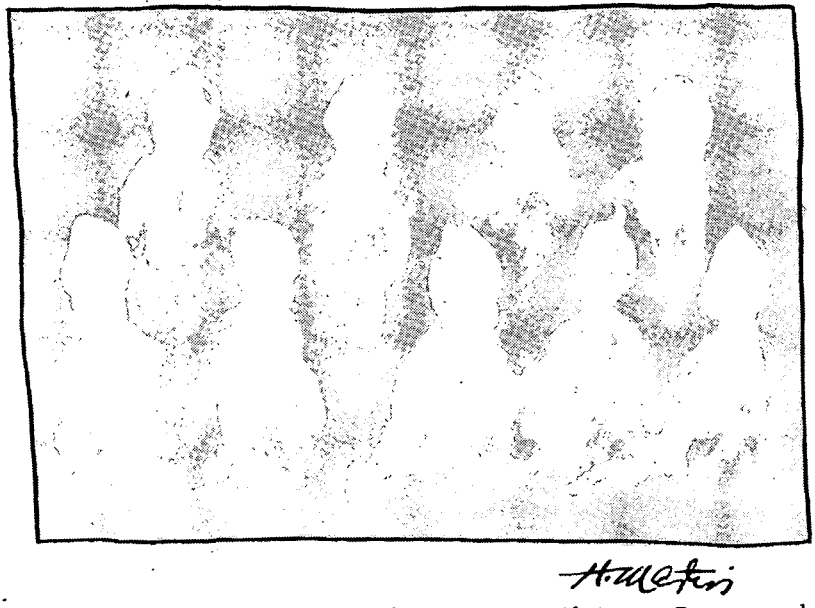
self, perhaps even Roskonnor's arrival in the Solar System — all these things had been merely part of the preparation for Jesus to bring his renewed message to mankind. Yes, I should have trusted God from the start.

So I began the broadcast.

And *that* is what everyone has been watching tonight. It went like a beautiful dream. Everything about the show seemed to work perfectly. Roskonnor in his Santa suit looked cute and cuddly. Matthew interviewed him superbly. Then Jesus spoke. He was calm and clear, our master and leader. He forgave us our past and showed us the way to the future. His message has gone out to all the Earth, the message that we are not alone, that other races also follow God.

The tranmission is over. Thank you, team; and thank you, viewers. I'm fading it out on an image of Matthew and Roskonnor — Earthling and Sirian — listening to their Maker together. Jesus who was born in Bethlehem is with us tonight, and with us always, wherever and *who*ever we are.

Happy Christmas, everyone!



Left to right: Back row: Marley, Christmas Past, Christmas Present and Christmas Future. Front row: Hamlet's father, Banquo, Elvira, Georgie and Headless Horseman.

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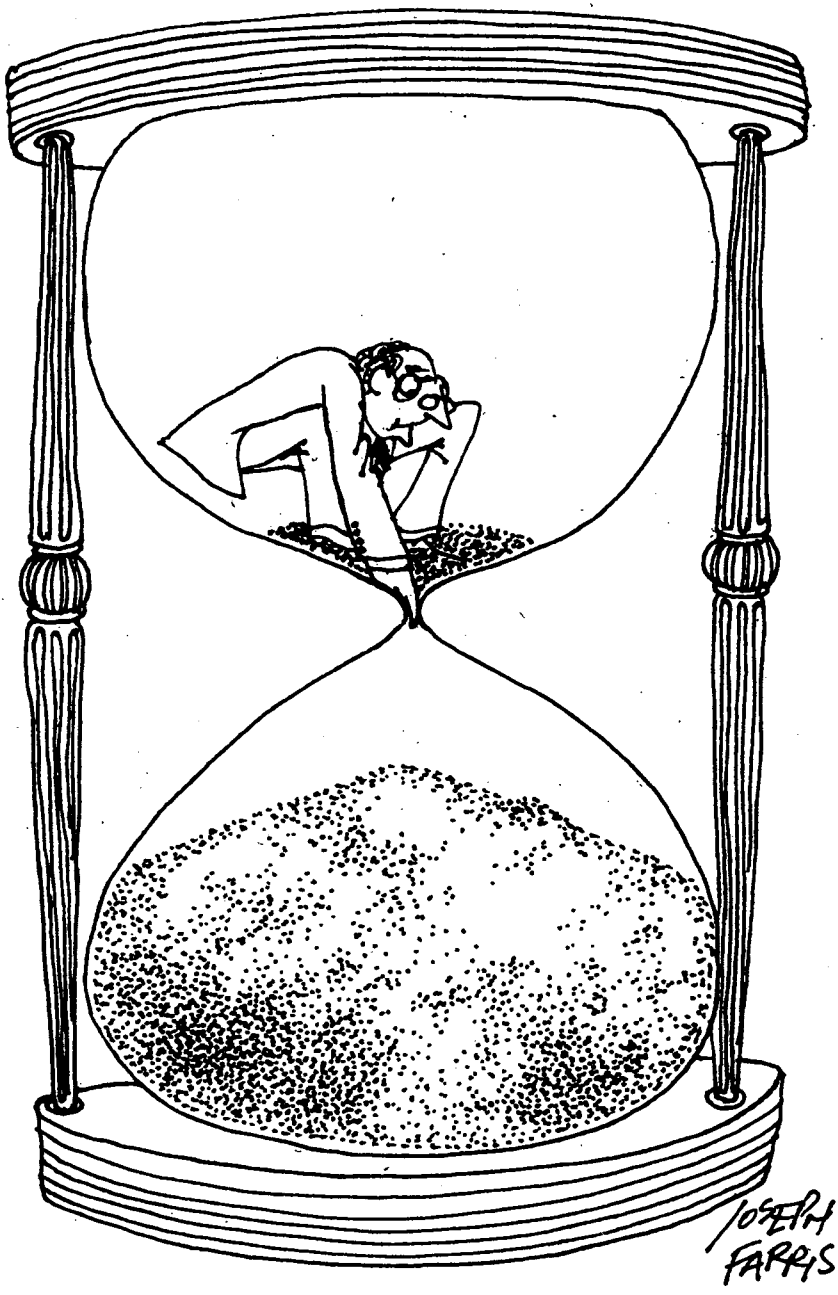

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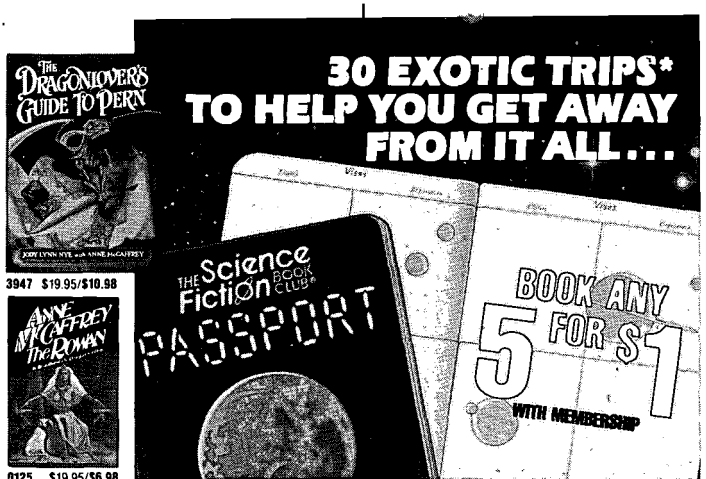

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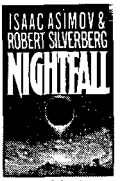

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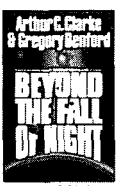

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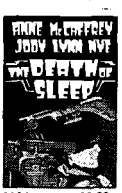

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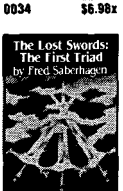

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